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WITH A STARTLED CRY BESSIE CAME TO A SUDDEN HALT, WHILE WITH STARING EYES SHE GAZED UPON AN OBJECT THAT STOOD IN HER PATH.

Little Grit, THE WILD RIDER;

OR,

Bessie, the Stock-Tender's Daughter.

A Romance of Pony Express Days.

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AUTHOR OF "THE HUSSAR CAPTAIN," "THE
SEA DEVIL," "DICK DEAD-EYE," "THE
BOY DUELIST," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE WILD RIDER.

THE bright moonlight streamed down upon an exciting scene, and a strange one, for over the prairie three horses were going at break-neck speed, two running side by side, and one a few rods in advance.

Upon the former were two men, and their cruel spurs were lacerating the sides of their straining animals.

Upon the latter horse, the one a short distance ahead of the others, was mounted a woman, and her keen whip fell with stinging blows upon the splendid animal she rode, and which was striving so hard to leave his pursuers behind, yet seemingly with little hope, for slowly but surely they gained.

"Gal, ef yer don't halt, I'll shoot yer," yelled one of the men, as for an instant the flying animal ahead, seemed gaining.

But the maiden made no reply, and simply glanced over her shoulder, the act showing that she was young and very lovely, though her face was white with dread, and her lips were quivering with nervous excitement.

But the man did not carry out his threat of shooting the girl, though he fired in the air as though to frighten her.

But though she started at the ringing report, she did not check her speed, and urged her struggling mare on more rapidly, while from her lips came the words:

"I would rather die than fall into their hands."

And again and again the pistol flashed, but the girl would not halt, yet she believed her pursuers were really firing upon her.

Before her was a slope, that after a short distance rose into the foothills of the mountains beyond; yet where was succor for her in all that vast solitude around, for nowhere was visible the habitation of man?

"Come, Princess, they are gaining upon you; come, my beauty," said the girl, encouragingly, and cheered by her voice the

noble beast made another effort to drop her pursuers; but in vain, for they were mounted upon hardy prairie horses, which, though Princess might easily run away from in a short race, when it came to mile after mile of hot chase over plain, hill and dale, they held the power of endurance that the blooded animal had to succumb to.

"Poor, poor Princess!" cried the maiden, as up the hill her mare staggered with fatigue.

"Ha! ha! my gal, we has you now," cried one of the men in great glee, as their horses now gained rapidly, and they knew that a few moments more would bring them alongside of their victim.

But, just as their steeds were within a length of Princess, and they were stretching forth their hands to capture the prize for which they were struggling, there was heard the rapid clatter of hoofs ahead, and instantly there dashed into sight a horseman.

He was going by like the wind, as if unmindful of whom he met, when from the lips of the maiden broke a cry for help, and a glance showed him the situation of affairs.

Instantly, with a word to his horse, he wheeled, and charged directly upon the two pursuers of the maiden, who quickly turned to meet him, for from one had come the warning cry:

"*The Wild Rider!*"

Then came several pistol-shots in rapid succession, the shriek of a wounded horse, a fall, and, as the dust and smoke drifted away, the maiden, whose tired mare had halted, beheld a horse and a rider prostrate upon the ground, and two horsemen close together, one holding a revolver to the head of the other.

"Thank God! he has saved me!" came in fervent tones from the maiden's lips, for, in the victor in the short but fierce combat, she recognized by the bright light of the moon, the one who had been called *The Wild Rider*.

CHAPTER II.

THE THREAT.

"LITTLE GRIT, yer has got me squar'."

"I am sorry I did not kill you, as I did that fellow lying there."

"I am glad, for I don't want ter hand in my checks yet; but what are you going to do with me?"

"That depends entirely upon what this lady wishes me to do with you; if she says kill you, I'll do so with pleasure. Will you please come here, miss, for this dog won't bite now?" and the horseman turned to the maiden, who sat on her panting horse a short distance away, gazing with intense interest upon the scene.

At his words she rode nearer, and the moonlight showed her a mere boy, splendidly mounted, as her rescuer.

His form was slender but wiry and his small waist, broad shoulders and square chest, denoted strength and endurance in a marked degree.

His face, as the moon shone upon it, was that of a youth of seventeen, and the features were clear-cut, handsome and full of determination, while his dark eyes had a flash in them that showed he would dare anything that a man would attempt.

He was attired in a black velvet jacket, white corduroy pants, stuck in handsome boots, the heels of which were armed with spurs of silver, and wore a gray sombrero with broad brim, and in a belt around his waist a pair of revolvers.

His horse was a long-bodied, small-legged black, and had no bridle on, while the saddle was exceedingly small, for the limbs of the rider hid it, and seemed more to be used to strap a pair of leather pockets to, than for the comfort of the horseman.

The man who had been in pursuit of the maiden was a rough, uncouth specimen of humanity, heavily armed, and dressed as a plainsman, and evidently a dangerous character.

As the maiden drew near the two, the youth noticed that she was a mere girl, scarcely more than sixteen, and that her face was very beautiful, and form exquisitely graceful in the dark riding habit she wore.

Shaken down by her hard ride, her hair hung down upon the back of her horse, and looked like strands of gold in the moonlight.

"Now, miss, if you say the word, I'll send a bullet through this fellow's brain," said the youth, who held the ruffian under cover of his revolver.

"No, no, sir, I would not wish that, though he is a very bad man, and with his companion there, decoyed me away from the train, under an excuse that my father had sent for me," said the maiden, in a sweet voice.

"You then belong to a train; I wondered how it was I found you here."

"My father commands a train of supplies going to Fort Aspen, sir, and these men belonged to the party, and of course, I did not expect harm from them, and when they said my father wished me to go on ahead a mile or two and join him, I accompanied them, until I saw that they were deceiving me, and they told me that they would hold me until well paid for taking me back."

"Aha! that is your game, is it, Hank Hawkins, for you see I know you? Well, I'll report your conduct along the line, and the boys will make it hot for you—go!"

"Does yer mean it, Little Grit?" asked the man, eagerly.

"Yes—no, remain here and look after your dead pard; and I will see you back to the train, miss, but you must ride fast, as I am riding Pony Express, and wouldn't have stopped if I hadn't seen that it was a lady in trouble; come, miss, please, and you, Hank Hawkins, remember that I'll keep my eye on you."

"And I know somebody ez hez the'r eyes on you, Little Grit," said the man, threateningly.

"Eah! what do I care for you?"

"'Tisn't me, altho' I doesn't intend to fer-git you."

"Who is it then?"

"Ther Boy Bandit."

"So be it; I fear that fellow and his gang of horse-thieves as little as I do you; come, miss, we must be off, and you'll have to drive your horse hard to keep up with Fire-fly."

As he spoke he wheeled his splendid horse alongside of Princess, and the two animals started off at a rapid gallop back toward the plains from whence the maiden had come.

CHAPTER III.

THE RED RAVINE.

"YOUR horse seems used up, miss," said the youth, after they had been riding along together for a few minutes, and Princess showed increased signs of failing.

"Yes, she seems to feel her long and rapid run, and I am sorry that I detain you, sir," replied the maiden.

"Oh, don't mind me— Hold!"

The sudden ejaculation of the young horseman had been occasioned by the appearance, over a ridge ahead of them, of half a dozen horsemen.

Suiting his action with his words, he had quickly seized the rein of his fair companion's horse, and the two animals had come to a sudden halt.

"Who are they?" asked the maiden anxiously, seeing the youth gazing earnestly at the approaching horsemen.

"They are fellows that, under the circumstances, I do not care to meet: the same ones whom Hank Hawkins threatened me with; but fortunately they do not yet see us, and we'll see if we can get away unseen."

Still holding the bridle-rein of the maiden's horse, and guiding his own by a movement of his knees, the youth wheeled short off of the trail, and endeavored to reach a thicket of scrub pines not far away.

At first he believed he would escape the observation of the horsemen, as they were laughing and talking together, and not very

watchful; but a sudden shout warned him that he was discovered, and he said quickly:

"Come, you must ride behind me, for your horse is useless."

As he spoke he threw his arm around the maiden's waist, and with an exhibition of strength that surprised her, quickly raised her from the saddle and set her down behind him.

"Firefly will lead those fellows a long race, even if he does carry a double load; come, old fellow."

"But my poor Princess," cried the maiden, as the splendid black bounded away at the word of his master.

"Must fall to the enemy, unless she can keep up without your weight."

And it was evident that Princess, at the call of her mistress, determined to make a desperate effort to keep along with the black that was carrying her load for her; but a few hundred feet were sufficient to show her that Firefly would soon drop her behind.

As the black bounded away the horsemen, whom the youth had said were dangerous foes to meet, started in rapid pursuit, and in a minute the chase began across the moonlit plain, for a short run brought the pursued free of the foothills, and the rolling prairie stretched before them for miles.

"It is ten miles to the next station, miss, and we can hold our own, I think," said the youth hopefully, as Firefly ran along like the wind, while his pursuers, seven in number, stretched out in hot chase.

"But they may fire upon you and wound your horse," she said, with dread.

"No, they are the band of the Boy Bandit, and they wish to catch me alive."

"The Boy Bandit! I have heard the scouts in the train tell strange, wild stories about him at night around the camp-fires; but is he really a boy, sir?"

"Yes; their leader, Captain Firebrand, is said to be but fifteen; see! that is he in advance, upon the white horse, and he is gaining upon us."

"And they would harm us if they captured us?"

"They would kill me and demand ransom of your father for you, miss; but don't be frightened, for Firefly holds up well, and if he falls under his double load, you are a splendid rider, and he can easily carry you on to the station on my saddle."

"And you?" quickly asked the young girl.

"I'll drop off at the Red Ravine, and they can never find me."

"No, no, let them take me, and father will pay the ransom, for you have said they will kill you if they capture you."

"You are a brave girl, but don't feel wor-

ried, for they won't get either one of us, I promise you."

The maiden hoped that her brave companion spoke truly, but glancing behind her she saw that the white horse was steadily gaining, and was now but fifty yards away.

A look behind showed the youth that, although Firefly was doing splendidly, he had a horse on his trail that, with his double weight, was more than a match for him, and he said:

"Do you see that lone tree ahead, miss?"

"Yes."

"Well, that stands at the head of the Red Ravine, and there I shall drop off, while you go on to the station."

"No, no, I will not allow you to do this; put me off and your horse will carry you rapidly out of danger."

The youth turned and looked the maiden squarely in the face and replied:

"You are a plucky girl; but I'd rather haul up and fight the whole band of the Boy Bandit, than do it. I tell you I know the Red Ravine well, and can easily dodge them in it, while Firefly will carry you on to the station and save you and the express and letters, and you can tell Handy, the agent, that I'm coming, but won't be on time."

"Are you sure you can escape?"

"I know it, for I've gotten out of many a worse scrape; now, I'll change places with you."

As he spoke he again put his arm around her slender waist, and raising her easily, brought her round in front of him, while he slid back into the place she had occupied.

Leaning over then, he hastily shortened the stirrup and placed her foot in it, and said:

"Now hold hard to Firefly's mane, for you see I use no bridle, and he will carry you safe; here is the tree; good-by, miss."

Ere she was aware, he had suddenly leaped lightly to the ground, just as Firefly ran under the shadow of the huge, low tree, and glancing back as the horse bounded on, she saw that the youth had mysteriously disappeared, while, relieved of his extra burden, the noble animal she rode was rapidly dropping the Boy Bandit behind him.

And still anxiously looking back over her shoulder, she discovered that but three continued in pursuit of her, the others having halted at the tree.

"They saw him spring from his horse, and he will surely be killed— Oh!"

The cry broke from her lips as several pistol-shots rung out in rapid succession, and greatly terrified, she looked back over her shoulder, to see a horseman dart out from under the shadow of the tree, and come on swiftly after the three who were pursuing her.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WILD RIDER'S RUSE.

WHEN the Wild Rider slipped off of Firefly at the lone tree, growing at the head of the Red Ravine his first intention seemed to spring down into the gully and run for his life; but a second thought seized upon him suddenly, and changing his first impulse, he sprung back into the shelter of the trunk and broken limbs piled up around it, and muttered:

"There's the ravine for refuge, if my little plan fails."

Hardly had he gained a hiding-place in the shadow of the foliage, and drawn a revolver, when he saw the white horse almost upon him, and he looked straight into the face of the Boy Bandit.

One glance, by the bright moonlight, showed him that the rider of the snow-white steed was certainly a most youthful personage, with long, golden curls hanging upon his shoulders, a suit of buckskin, fringed and beaded, a broad, black sombrero, and belt-of-arms.

He sat his horse, a splendid animal, like one born in the saddle, and his eyes were fixed intently on the flying black and his fair burden in front.

"I could kill him, and—but I won't," and the Wild Rider lowered his revolver, which he had half-raised, and the Boy Bandit swept on, little dreaming of danger, for he saw not the dark form crouching in the shadow.

"No, another time we will meet on fairer terms, and then one of us must die," muttered the youth, and he crouched still closer as two of the band, large, bearded men, swept by on the heels of their young chief.

A few seconds more and up dashed another of the band and halted, and the remaining three did the same, one of them, the first-comer, calling out:

"We'll await the chief here, pards."

But, as the words left his lips, out of the shadow around the trunk of the tree came a flash, another, and another, and down from his horse fell one of the bandits, and to the ground dropped the steeds of the balance, while out from his hiding-place darted the Pony Express Rider, and ere the startled outlaws knew what had happened, and could extricate themselves from their fallen animals, the Wild Rider had thrown himself into the saddle of the man he had slain, and with a ringing laugh, rode away like the wind followed by a few scattering shots, and bitter curses from his discomfited foes, whom his unerring aim had dismounted.

The Boy Bandit heard the shots and looked back, but intent on the wished-for prize ahead of him, he held on, confident that his

men would not be defeated by anything they had found at the head of the ravine, and little dreaming that it was the one he sought, that had so cleverly mounted himself and dismounted the outlaws.

And thus the chase continued, with the maiden mounted on the bridleless horse of the Wild Rider, dashing along in advance, and steadily gaining, and the white steed pressing on hard in pursuit, urged by the Boy Bandit, while behind half a hundred yards, came his two men, who rode side by side, their horses seeming of equal speed.

About a like distance in the rear of these two, came a gallant bay, evidently held in check by his rider, upon whose face was a triumphant smile.

Presently over a roll in the prairie appeared a band of horsemen, and they were a score in number, while at their head rode a large man in undress military uniform.

At a glance he saw the coming black, and instantly was on the *qui vive*, and fluttering in the moonlight was visible a skirt, which caused him to cry out:

"Thank God! it is my child!" and raising his voice he cried in ringing tones:

"Helen! Helen! my child, come to me!"

Back on the wind came the response:

"Father, I am safe, come!"

But the black swerved from his course, and increasing, rather than diminishing his speed, sped on like the very wind, to the amusement of all who saw him.

"In heaven's name! what does it mean?" cried the father, and raising his voice again, he called out:

"Helen, stop! wait for me!"

"I cannot! come!"

Back to their ears came her reply and all stood an instant gazing into each other's faces in wonder, until one quick eye caught sight of three horsemen flying back over the prairie.

"See! they were in pursuit of her!" cried the man, and from several lips broke the words:

"The Boy Bandit and his men!"

"Then after them, a dozen of you, while I follow my child," and calling to a half a dozen of his followers to accompany him, the officer sped away in chase of Firefly, while the remainder of the party, with wild shouts, rode off in pursuit of the snow-white steed, so well known along the Overland trail.

But on went the flying black, straight to the station, where soon after he drew up, panting from his long run.

It was but half a dozen shanties, Rocky Glen Station, besides the stables and public house, which a wonderful stretch of imagination called a hotel, and as the rapid clat-

ter of hoofs told the idlers within that the Pony Express Rider was coming, nearly two score of rough-looking men stepped out of the bar-room to greet Wild Rider, who was a great favorite along the line.

CHAPTER V.

AT THE RIDERS' REST.

"THE festive youth are half a hour late, pards, an' it's sure suthin' is gone wrong, for he are allus on time, an' a leetle ahead," and Trumps, a large-bodied, frank-faced frontiersman, who had been trapper, guide, teamster and miner, and gambler through all, threw down his last card, a trump, and raked the winnings into his capacious pocket, while he gazed around upon the motley crowd in Judge Hunter's Riders' Rest Tavern, to get some one to contradict his statement that something had gone wrong with Wild Rider of the Pony Express.

"I fears you is right, Trump, fer ther boy isn't one ter tarry on his run, ef it do be a leetle ride o' ninety miles and but seven hosses ter do it with, an' it up hill an' down dale an' over pararer too," replied Bony Bob, another border character, who had just lost half a pound of gold-dust to Trumps, who had won his lucky name from always holding a trump card to defeat an adversary with.

"Oh, the boy will turn up all right; the devil takes care of his own, and that youth seems to be one of his especial pets," remarked a person sitting at another table playing cards, and winning heavily, too, with that nonchalant manner that betokens the professional gambler and the cool sport.

He had been known at the different stage-coach and pony-riders' stations along the Overland as Gambler Grey, and yet was more frequently called the Kid Glove Sport, from the fact that he always wore a pair of kid gloves upon his shapely hands, no one ever having seen him without them, asleep or awake.

He was dressed in a suit of Mexican cavalier costume, trimmed with solid gold buttons, gold braid, and with the inner adornments of the slashes in the sleeves and pants of silk and fine lace.

A white, blue or red silk shirt, with the wide collar turned back over his shoulders, and a cravat of fine lace he also wore, as suited his fancy, and a pair of patent-leather boots and black sombrero completed his very fancy costume, if I except one important feature in the shape of a belt of fancy leather, in which was a jewel-hilted knife and two pearl-handled pistols.

His face was dark, always wore a sinis-

ter smile, and yet was strikingly handsome, as far as regularity of features went, and his hair was long and curling, and the ends of his black silken mustache rested upon his shoulders.

The days he generally passed in the saddle, going no one knew where; but his evenings he spent in the saloon of the Riders' Rest, where he had a room, and nightly he added to his winnings, for he was a skillful gambler.

In answer to his remark about the Pony Express Rider, Trumps responded:

"You ought ter know, Kid Glove, who ther devil fancies, fer you is said ter be kin ter him."

The dark eyes of Gambler Grey flashed for an instant in anger, but checking a quick reply, he said:

"If you and I should ever quarrel, Trumps, you would think me Satan himself."

"Oh! I knows yer has grit, fer I has seen yer tried; but I doesn't fear yer, Gambler Grey, an' we will hev more'n a quarrel ef yer don't quit throwin' slurs at thet Pony Rider, when he hain't round ter hit back, as he would do if you insulted him."

"I did not insult Wild Rider, Trumps. I know that he is, although a boy in years, the inferior of few men as regards strength, endurance and pluck; but I think there is something wrong about him."

"What does yer mean by wrong, pard?" asked Bony Bob.

"Oh, it matters not what I mean; I have my opinion about him, and I'll keep it until the right time to make it known."

"Ef it's a bad opinyun yer'd better keep it dark, Pard Grey, or yer'll git inter trouble, fer I loves thet boy; he's grit to ther backbone, an' it were I who gave him ther name o' Little Grit, arter ther three duels he fought up at Sweetwater with ther galoots thet picked him up fer a baby 'cause no ha'r don't grow on his face."

"I heard of that one he fought with a knife and killed him; the second he shot, and the third he thrashed in a fair fist fight," said Gambler Grey.

"Fact! I seen ther rackits, an' it were done prime; but I hears a rattle o' hoofs without, an' it's ther Wild Rider hisse'f."

Out of the saloon then Trump the miner led the way, followed by all the others, and from the lips of the crowd broke a shout, as the black steed of the Wild Rider was recognized, coming up to the station at a full run.

But the next moment up he dashed to the door, and an exclamation of amazement was heard, as, instead of the Wild Rider, they saw upon the Firefly's back the slender form of a young girl, whose beautiful face was

turned upon them with a look of surprise, if not of alarm.

"Satan has metamorphosed the boy into a beautiful girl," said Gambler Grey, as he forced his way to the side of the horse, just as Judge Hunter, the proprietor of Riders' Rest cried in astonishment:

"Well, miss, has Wild Rider given up the Express to you?"

"For the run into this station, yes, sir; he rescued me from two men who had captured me, and being hard pressed by the Boy Bandit and his band, he sent me on alone on his horse, while he sought refuge in the Red Ravine," was the maiden's reply, in a distinct tone that reached every ear.

"I hope no harm has befallen the boy; but it's just like him to be doing some brave action, and he cares little for the consequences."

"I do hope, sir, that he has escaped; but I heard pistol-shots as I rode on, and—"

"Pards, does yer heur? Ther Wild Rider are in trouble, an' I wants men ter go with me ter help him out," cried Trumps, interrupting the maiden, and his words were answered with a shout from the crowd, while Gambler Grey asked quickly:

"But who comes here?"

All eyes turned in the direction in which he looked, and nearly every hand dropped on a revolver butt, for a party of horsemen were seen coming toward the station at a rapid pace.

"Hold, gentlemen! it is my father, Colonel Hewlett, who has been searching for me; I passed him several miles back, but this horse would not stop, and they followed me here," said the maiden quickly.

"It's just like Firefly, miss; the Wild Rider told him to bring you on to the station, and he has done it; but dismount, miss, and come into my hotel and rest."

The kind-hearted proprietor of the Riders' Rest lifted the maiden from the saddle and led her into the house, just as Colonel Hadley Hewlett and his followers dashed up, the officer in evident alarm.

"My daughter! have you seen her?" he cried, eagerly, as he threw himself from the saddle.

"Yes, sir, she is here," answered Gambler Grey, and he led the officer into the tavern, and with a cry of joy the maiden threw herself into her father's arms.

"My child, what has happened to you?" cried Colonel Hewlett, anxiously.

"Two of the train men were traitors, father, and they led me away, with the excuse that you were on ahead and wished me to join you there, when their intention was to make you pay a large sum for my recovery."

"The scoundrels! they shall suffer for this!"

"One of them is dead, sir, for I escaped from them, and was only saved from recapture by a young man they call the Wild Rider, a Pony Express Rider."

"He killed Red Fred and made Hank Hawkins a prisoner, but released him and came on with me until we were chased by the Boy Bandit and his men, and he left me to come on alone on his horse, while he jumped off at a ravine."

"And there you left him, Helen?"

"Yes, sir; he sent his horse on, and I could not stop him."

"Ah, now I understand why you did not stop for me; I hope no harm has befallen the brave lad."

As Colonel Hewlett spoke a loud shout was heard without, and then followed the clatter of hoofs, and a cry from Trumps:

"Hooray! hooray! ther boy are coming!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE DEATH TRAIL.

HARDLY had the cheering ceased, when the door of the hotel sitting-room opened, and in stepped Little Grit, the Wild Rider, his face calm, and no trace of excitement in his manner, though it was evident that he had just passed through some scene of thrilling danger.

"Ah, my boy, I am delighted to see you, for I had my fears about your safety as this young lady told me where she left you," and Judge Hunter stepped forward and warmly grasped the hand of the youth, who answered quietly, and modestly:

"It was a dangerous situation, judge; but I managed to rid the border of an outlaw, get his horse, and prevent the others following me by dropping the animals they rode, though I think it would have been better to have shot the riders."

"Then it was you, sir, that I saw dash out from the shadow of the tree after the firing?" said the maiden, in surprise.

"Yes, miss, and when your friends, as I believed them, put the Boy Bandit to flight, I followed him, hoping to get a close look at him; but I dashed suddenly into the midst of his band, encamped over a rise in the prairie, and I tell you it was a hard run to get away; but here I am, you see."

"And I am glad to thank you, sir, for all you have done for me; this is my father, and he will prove his appreciation of your service to his daughter."

"Boy, who are you?"

The question came as a demand, and in tones of excitement, from the lips of Colonel Hewlett, as he turned his eyes full upon the

youth, who colored at the peremptory almost rude address, and answered:

"I am called Little Grit along the Overland, sir."

"But you have another name?" was the stern rejoinder.

"Yes, I am also known at the stations as the Wild Rider."

"And he deserves the title, colonel, for he is the best horseman on the trail, and can get more out of an animal than any one else on the border," said Judge Hunter with enthusiasm.

"Nonsense! I am not speaking of his prowess or ability, but his name, and again I ask you, boy, what it is?" said the colonel, pettishly.

Evidently nettled by the officer's manner, the youth replied:

"I have given you two, sir, and you add that of *Boy*, and I think the three should answer you."

"Hal that is your answer, is it? But I will know, boy, the name you refuse to tell me, even if you are ashamed of it."

"Father! you forget what I owe this young man; what matters it to you what may be his name?" said Helen Hewlett hotly, while the judge put in:

"Out here, colonel, hardly any man goes by his own name, and I do not see why Little Grit should tell you what his is, if he prefers not to."

"He doubtless hides it from the cause that other men conceal their identity under false names; but I know his face, and have met it under no very pleasant circumstances, I'll warrant, and for that reason wish to know who he is, but it is a matter of indifference, I assure you; come, Helen, we will return to camp."

"My horse you know, father, is lost, and—"

"Take the horse you rode here—"

"Father, that one belonged to this young gentleman, and I have already received more kindness at his hands than I can repay, and which you do not seem to appreciate."

"Pardon me, miss, but your horse galloped into the station just ahead of me, and she will readily last you to your camp; I will bring her to the door for you," and Little Grit left the room, while Colonel Hewlett, with a clouded face, turned to Judge Hunter and said:

"Can you tell me, sir, the name of that youth?"

"If I could, sir, seeing that he does not wish you to know it, I would not; but the truth is, no one here knows it, and he is entered on the Pony Express books simply as the Boy Rider. You think you have met him before?"

"I am convinced of it; how long has he been on the Overland route?"

"About a year, I believe; he was riding when I came here, six months ago, and is known as the most daring rider on the road, while he has rendered valuable service on many occasions, and is the particular dread of the Boy Bandit and his band."

"Yes, I have heard of that curse of the border, too—in fact, I met him six months ago when I came west on special duty, for he robbed the stage-coach in which I was a passenger, and to be frank, I really thought that boy, Little Grit, as you call him, was one and the same."

"That is impossible, Colonel Hewlett. Little Grit is a most honorable youth, and the Boy Bandit's implacable foe. I am sorry to have you hold such a suspicion against my young friend," said the judge, warmly.

"Well, it was only a suspicion; but I intend now to have command of this border, and Boy Bandits, desperadoes and all will have to look out, for I shall put down all outlawry, I assure you," and ere more was said, Little Grit entered the room and stated that Helen Hewlett's horse had been caught and awaited her.

In spite of the maiden's low request to her father, to thank the youth for what he had done for her, the colonel did not do so, but placing her in her saddle, mounted his own horse, and followed by the men who had accompanied him to Rocky Glen Station, rode off to the encampment of his train, some half-dozen miles distant.

Hardly had they disappeared from sight when there came the rapid clatter of hoofs, and out of the timber, some hundred yards away, came a horseman at full speed.

"It is Jockey Jack coming back," cried Judge Hunter, referring to the Pony Rider who rode between Rocky Glen Station and the point seventy-five miles beyond, and who had darted away with Little Grit's bag, as soon as Firefly had come in with Helen Hewlett mounted upon him.

"It are Jockey Jack for sure," said Bony Bob, and all glanced anxiously upon the coming horse and rider.

Another instant and the animal with a loud neigh halted at the door of the tavern, and all crowded around the rider, who sat bolt upright in his saddle.

"Great God! he is dead!"

The cry came from Judge Hunter, and in amazement all recognized the truth of his words, for strapped in his saddle and held up by stout sticks upon either side, that were firmly fastened around him, was Jockey Jack the Pony Express Rider, with a bullet in his brain.

"Here are a piece of paper with writin';

some o' you as has better eyes fer readin', spit out what is writ on it," and Trumps took from the man's breast, where it was pinned, a card on which was written a line in a bold hand.

Taking it, Little Grit read aloud:

"Death lies in wait on the Overland. Your turn next, Little Grit the Wild Rider."

A hush fell upon the crowd, and it was broken by the one who had just read this fearful threat against him, and he said:

"Judge, if you will let Hook bring round Flash, I'll ride poor Jockey Jack's run, and let them know along this line why he did not bring the Express."

"But you start back on your ride to-morrow night, Little Grit."

"True, judge; and I shall be back to ride it."

"A hundred and fifty miles by dark to-morrow night, my boy, and then your own run? it is impossible."

"I shall make it, judge; please order Flash," was the firm reply, and the judge, who was station agent, reluctantly obeyed.

Ten minutes after, Little Grit sprung upon the back of his splendid bay, that, like Firefly, was ridden without a bridle, and a rousing cheer greeted the daring Wild Rider as he sped away like the wind, regardless of the threat against his life.

CHAPTER VII.

THE RESCUE.

WHILE poor Jockey Jack was receiving a decent burial, at the hands of his friends at Rocky Glen Station, Little Grit was flying along the moonlit trail, the clatter of the iron-shod hoofs of his horse the only sound that broke the deathlike stillness that rested upon the scenes through which he flitted like a phantom rider.

Mile after mile was cast behind by the swift and tireless Flash, who ran with neck stretched out and at a pace that few horses could equal, while his master sat like a statue in his small saddle, his eyes peering into the misty distance ahead, to spy out any danger that might be lurking in his pathway.

At length Flash swept over the ridge of a low hill, that marked fifteen miles from Rocky Glen, and before him a short distance, lay the lonely cabin of the stock-tender, where Little Grit expected to change horses for the next ride, a dash across prairie-land of six leagues.

"Why, Benton is up late to-night; doubtless having a game of cards with somebody that has dropped in," said Little Grit, as a light in the cabin window caught his eye.

The next minute he dashed up to the low stockade to find the half-score of horses

kept there for the Pony Riders, standing hitched outside, while angry voices were heard within.

As he came to a halt, a loud cry was heard within, and then came in piercing tones:

"Jockey Jack, help me! save me!"

"Jockey Jack are dead, gal, an' yer yells in vain."

This last was said in a gruff voice, and the one who called for help Little Grit knew to be the stock-tender's daughter, a pretty girl of eighteen.

In an instant he had dismounted, and revolver in hand, was advancing to the cabin entrance, when he again heard, in the same rude tone:

"I knows yer has gold-dust heur, gal, so give it, or yer'll suffer as did yer daddy."

"I tell you I know not of any gold here, and my father would have given it up, rather than be murdered; oh! what shall I do?"

With the last word Little Grit stepped into the room, and a thrilling scene met his gaze, for two rough-looking men held in their grasp Bessie Benton, the pretty daughter of the stock-tender, and in front of her stood a burly ruffian with a rope end in his hand, and which was passed over a beam in the cabin, and around the girl's neck.

To the same beam, swinging to and fro, and with blackened and ghastly face, hung the form of a man, whom the youth recognized as Dan Benton, the stock-tender, while ransacking some boxes and chests in the humble cabin, were four more of the band, whom Little Grit knew to be outlaws.

"We has kilt Jockey Jack, gal, strung yer father up, an' you'll go, ef yer don't tell us whar ther gold-dust are hid, for we is goin' ter work ther whole line o' trail now," and the apparent leader of the outlaws gave the rope a pull, until it tightened painfully around the neck of the maiden.

But it was the last act of his life, for, regardless of consequences, Little Grit drew trigger and the man sprung into the air with a shriek, and fell upon the floor a corpse.

But quickly followed two more shots, and down went one of the men who were holding Bessie Benton, while the other let go his hold and clapped his hands to his head with a howl of rage and pain.

"Come, Bessie, here!" shouted Little Grit, and in the dense smoke the girl saw a slender form glide to her side, and though the other outlaws now fired at random from their corner, she felt herself borne to the door, and the next instant was out in the pure air.

"Quick Bessie, spring on the best horse

of your lot and ride like the wind and warn them at Rocky Glen," cried Little Grit, as he forced the maiden through the stockade gate and out among the horses.

"And you, Little Grit?" asked the young girl.

"I'll go on Jockey Jack's run; quick, for those devils are coming," and he almost threw Bessie upon the nearest horse, and cutting loose the halter gave her the end.

"Hold on thar! we is coming," came in stern tones from the cabin, and the door, which Little Grit had closed behind him, was thrown open, and out dashed four outlaws.

"Go, for God's sake, Bessie!" shouted the Wild Rider.

"I will not leave you in danger, Little Grit," was the determined response.

"I am going, now!" and the youth struck her horse a violent blow, just as several shots came from the outlaws, and startled the frightened animals fastened to the fence.

Away darted the horse with Bessie, and with a shot in response, Little Grit threw himself upon the back of Flash, and with a defiant shout darted away.

"It's the Wild Rider! foller him, pards," yelled an outlaw.

"No, let him go, for he's a-ridin' toward ther river; come, cotch ther girl, or she'll rouse 'em at Rocky Glen," replied another, and two men rushed out and mounting in hot haste rode after Bessie Benton.

Instantly Little Grit halted, and gazing back watched the chase for an instant, and then said in a joyous tone:

"As luck would have it, I mounted her upon a fleet horse, for she is dropping them; now, Flash, old fellow, there is double work ahead of you, but I cannot spare you; come, show your mettle."

As if understanding the words of his young master, Flash darted off like a bird, and once more the Wild Rider was dashing along the moonlit trail, having lost just five minutes at Dan Benton's stockade; but ere he had gone a dozen rods, he halted and turned back, saying firmly:

"I'll risk it!"

CHAPTER VIII

THE PHANTOM RIDER.

WHEN Little Grit struck the horse, upon which Bessie Benton was mounted, she was compelled to go and leave the brave youth, whether she cared to or not, and realizing that he knew best what she should do, and that he was fully capable of taking care of himself, she urged the animal on rapidly up the trail leading to Rocky Glen.

But she had not gone far before she discov-

ered that she was pursued, and at once she felt anxiety for her personal safety, as she knew how cruel had been her foes, and the hanging form of her father was before her eyes, in all its horrid ghastliness.

Encouraging her horse to greater speed she soon felt assured that she was mistress of the situation, as he ran along easily and gained steadily, although her pursuers were pressing their steeds with whip, spur and shout.

As if seeing how utterly useless the chase was the two men gave it up, but yet Bessie Benton continued her rapid flight until she came to a narrow canyon, where she lessened the speed of her horse for an instant, and then, with a startled cry came to a sudden halt, while with staring eyes she gazed before her upon an object that stood in her path.

Just where a few moonbeams struggled through the foliage and fell into the canyon were a horse and rider, or *phantoms*.

A snow-white steed, standing as motionless as though carved in marble, and a rider that was clad in a gauzy material sat in her saddle, for it was a woman, and seemed gazing intently at the maiden who had invaded the dark retreat.

"It is the Phantom Rider! the Spirit of the Canyon!" cried Bessie in dismay, and in terror she turned to fly, and, as if also startled at the strange apparition, her horse sped away at fearful speed, and, unguided by his rider, turned into a trail running along the ridge of the hill.

As she gained the path, where the few straggling trees did not obstruct the view, Bessie Benton glanced over her shoulder with a shudder to see if she was followed, and a cold chill seemed creeping over her heart, as she beheld the Spirit of the Canyon coming rapidly on in chase.

"Fly! oh fly! good horse!" she cried anxiously, and the long end of the halter serving as a whip, she lashed the flying animal savagely, and smarting with pain he increased his speed, and bounded along at a pace that was dangerous in the extreme, considering the nature of the trail.

"She is gaining upon me, and yet I cannot hear the hoof-falls," said Bessie, and she strained her ears to catch the sound; but her own horse made such a loud clatter as his iron shoes struck the loose rocks and flinty ground, that it seemed to drown all other noise, and she felt that it was her imagination only that caused her to think that the white horse behind her was gliding silently along rather than running.

At last, unable to stand this suspense any longer, she suddenly drew hard on the halter and brought her horse to a standstill.

Then, nervously she listened,

while her eyes were riveted upon the coming phantom-like steed and rider.

No, not a sound did she hear, not the ring of iron, or heavy stroke of a hoof; the strange animal was coming silently and swiftly on.

Once more, with renewed terror, Bessie rode on, almost reeling from her seat as she felt that she was being pursued by creatures of a supernatural nature, and at last she became so unnerved that her horse took his own course, and unguided by her, fled down hill-side, through valley, and over level plateaus at his own free will.

But as he ran each moment his speed decreased, and the maiden felt that ere long he would fail her.

And what then?

Alone in those wild solitudes with a being she felt assured was not of the earth, what would be her fate?

She feared she would go mad with terror, for already there was an icy chill at her heart, and her brain was on fire.

Another glance behind her she gave, just as her horse staggered out of the waters of a shallow creek, and then she felt herself falling, and down upon the soft sward went steed and rider, and behind them came silently on the Spirit of the Canyon.

One piercing shriek broke from Bessie's lips and she knew no more.

CHAPTER IX.

JUST IN TIME.

WHEN Little Grit turned back from his run on the Express route, he suddenly gave a series of wild yells, repeating them so rapidly, and so changing his voice, that one who heard them would have believed half a score of men were coming.

And so the two outlaws that were pillaging the cabin of the man they had hanged did believe, for they hastily took their departure, and were mounting their horses, just as the two who had pursued Bessie Benton rode up.

"They has wind o' our doin's, pards, so we'd better levant," said one, and as the yells now resounded nearer, and there came the echoes back from a cliff not far away, they departed in haste, each man carrying with him a led horse from the station.

But hardly had they disappeared in the spruce thicket, when Little Grit dashed up to the cabin, having been watching their departure.

"Thank goodness they did not overtake Bessie, for she'll soon reach Rocky Glen and the boys will make it hot for the outlaws. Now to see if it was imagination on my part," and the youth entered the cabin and walked straight up to the suspended form of Dan Benton, the stock-tender.

Pressing his head against his breast, he

listened for an instant, and then said, quickly:

"I was right—he *lives*!"

Quickly he cut the stock-tender down, unbound his hands from behind his back, and commenced rubbing him to create circulation.

But life seemed hard to bring back, and no sign of returning consciousness was visible.

But the youth did not despair, and pouring a few drops of water into the mouth at a time, and bathing and rubbing the swollen neck untiringly, he was at last rejoiced to see the breast heave and the eyes open, while in hoarse tones the stock-tender said:

"Devils! you may kill me, but you shall not have my gold."

"Mr. Benton, your enemies have gone, and I am here, so have no dread," said Little Grit, kindly.

The eyes opened again and turned slowly upon the speaker, and then beamed with recognition, while with an effort the man said:

"What, Wild Rider, you here?"

"Yes; I came up and found you in trouble, and so sailed in."

"But there were a number of men."

"Well, they have all gone now, and Bessie has ridden to Rocky Glen to carry the news to the judge, that the Boy Bandit's gang is tapping the stations and stealing the stock."

"Bessie is a good, brave girl; but how is it. I find you here, Wild Rider?"

"Jockey Jack started with my Express sachel, and came back dead in his saddle, and I am riding his trip, though I'm an hour behind time now, so will leave you, if you are all right again."

"Oh! I'm all right; see, I can sit up," and with an effort he arose to his feet.

He was a fine-looking man, with long beard and hair, and dressed in a miner's suit of red shirt, black pants, top-boots and sombrero.

His face was strangely sad, but intelligent, and one seeing that he was a man of refinement and education, would wonder why he had sought that wild land, and held the position of stock-tender to the Pony Express Company.

"Boy, I owe you my life, for you saved me from death, and it is no idle boast for me to say that if necessary I would give it up to serve you; I am a man of a few words, but I feel deeply, and Dan Benton will not forget this night."

"They strung you up because you would not tell where your gold was hidden; they must think the company pays stock-tenders a high salary," said Little Grit, "to suspect that you could get rich here."

Dan Benton gave a piercing look into the boy's face, and a strange expression hovered about his mouth, but he said quietly:

"They did not get gold, that is certain; but do not let me detain you, Little Grit, for I know how you love to be punctual.

"I will remain here until Bessie returns with the boys, but don't you be rash and meet poor Jockey Jack's fate."

"I'll be careful; there's some stiffes to show the boys when they come," and pointing to the dead outlaws he had slain, Little Grit, with a light laugh, left the cabin, and once more throwing himself into the saddle, darted away at the full speed of his noble horse, leaving Dan Benton standing before his door gazing earnestly after him.

CHAPTER X.

AMBUSHED.

REFRESHED by his rest at the cabin, Flash sped swiftly along over the stretch of level plain that the trail led over after leaving Dan Benton's station, and at last went over a rise in the prairie that would have given his rider a view of the next halting-place had it been visible.

But a disappointed neigh from Flash and an exclamation of surprise from Little Grit came in chorus, as instead of the cabin with its stockade walls surrounding it, but a heap of smoldering ruins was visible.

"They have been here too, and poor Mustang Pete has doubtless been killed; yes, there he lies," and drawing rein, Little Grit sprung to the ground and bent over a human form that lay motionless in his path.

It was a man clad half in buckskin, half in Mexican costume, and the moonlight showed several bullet wounds in his head, while a pistol was clasped with a death-gripe in his hand, showing that he had not died tamely.

"Yes, it is Mustang Pete, and they have run the horses off, so, Flash, old boy, you will have to make fifteen miles more, and over bad country too," and Little Grit patted his horse affectionately, but a sudden start of the animal caused him to be on his guard at once, and instantly he was in his saddle, his revolver in hand.

This sudden move saved his life, for there came a flash from behind a part of the stockade that had not been burned, and a bullet whistled uncomfortably near.

"Coward! that's your game, is it? Come out from your shelter and fight me like a man," cried Little Grit, and, as he spoke, again over the stockade appeared a dark object, and once more came the flash and report of a rifle.

But that instant had been enough for the quick eye of the youth, whose revolver also

rung forth, the two reports sounding as one, and a cry of pain following quickly.

But the cry came not from Little Grit, who spurred forward, unhurt by the bullet of his foe, to suddenly go down to the earth, as his noble horse staggered and fell, the shot having struck him instead of his rider.

"Curse you! I knew I had not missed you," cried a hoarse voice, and a man sprung from behind the stockade and rushed toward the prostrate youth.

But as he bent above his supposed victim a revolver was suddenly thrust into his face and he heard the unwelcome words:

"You did miss me, you accursed assassin, so up with your hands!"

Up went one hand quickly above the head of the man, and again came the stern order:

"The other hand, sir!"

"Pard, I can't do it; yer broke it with yer shot," came the whining response.

"Then I did not miss you, I am glad to see," and still covering the outlaw, Wild Rider arose from where he lay on his back and confronted the now frightened prisoner, who cried out suddenly:

"Lordy! you is ther Wild Rider!"

"Yes, so men call me: why did you seek my life?"

"Didn't seek yer life, pard, but ther life o' Jockey Jack, should he escape ther lads back on ther trail."

"He did not escape them, but I did."

"But this hain't your run, Wild Rider."

"Yes, it is for to-night; so you wanted to rob the Express, did you?"

"Ther captain told me to lay for him."

"Captain who?"

"Captain Firebrand."

"The Boy Bandit?"

"That's ther rooster. Lordy! but my arm do hurt," and the man winced with pain.

"You should have been saved suffering by a bullet through your heart."

"Now, pard, don't talk thet way."

"I'll act, not talk, sir; now tell me, where is Mustang Pete?"

"Gone."

"Where?"

"Cashed in his checks."

"You killed him?"

"Oh, no, not me, fer I am too tenderfooted, pard, ter hurt anybody."

"So you just proved by firing twice at me. Who killed him?"

"Ther boys."

"Some of your men?"

"Yas, leetle pard."

"And burned the station and ran off the stock?"

"~~And~~ pard."

"I were left here to await the Rid

"Yer has it down fine."

"Well, you've been caught in your own trap, but as I've left my mark on you I will not kill you as you deserve."

"I are bleeding free, pard."

"I don't wish you to bleed to death; here, let me see your wound."

The youth drew the sleeve from the arm, the man groaning with pain, and saw that the bullet had cut an ugly wound in the flesh just below the shoulder, and that the bone was broken.

"I will bandage your arm, and then you can hasten to your stronghold, and let your comrades care for you; where is your horse?"

"Over in the timber, pard."

"Is he a good animal?"

"He are for a fact."

"Then I shall take him and continue on my run."

"Lordy, pard, what is yer goin' ter give me?"

"Your life."

"T'ankee; I'm obleeged to yer; I has no cause ter grumble."

"I am glad you are pleased," and having bound up the wounded arm he continued:

"Now come and show me where your horse is, and then, if you value life, you had better make tracks, for the boys from Rocky Glen will be along this way soon."

"You don't say! then our pards hain't been makin' such a big thing o' the strike along ther line ter-night."

"They have done enough to keep them in remembrance, you can be assured," and unstrapping his saddle and leather Express sachel from his dead horse, and patting him affectionately, Little Grit turned to go with the outlaw, when he looked squarely into the muzzle of a revolver, and heard in triumphant tones:

"Leetle pard, I'm guessin' I'll keep my hoss, an' trouble yer fer them 'spress bags."

CHAPTER XI.

THE LEAP FOR LIFE.

"I was a fool to trust a wounded snake!" said Little Grit, with an air of almost reckless indifference at the position he found himself in.

"You takes it coolly; but when I tells yer thet thar is a price offered for you, an' I intends ter win it, I guesses you'll wilt."

"Well, what are you going to do with me?"

"Carry yer ter ther Boy Bandit, our chief, who fer some reason o' his own, wants ter see yer durned bad."

"Well, let us be off; what shall I do?"

"March ahead o' me, leetle pard, fer close to yer comp'ny are mighty dangersome."

Little Grit turned, as if to obey, and the outlaw half-lowered his revolver; but it was an unlucky move on his part, for with the spring of a tiger the youth was upon him, and his gripe of iron held the weapon, while he said, in the same tone of seeming indifference which he had before used:

"Turn about is fair play; now make tracks, sir, or I'll repent and break your head as I have your arm."

"Which way, leetle pard?" asked the thoroughly alarmed man.

"North, south, east or west, but go!"

"Jist watch me!" and away the outlaw darted, most anxious to get out of range of the youth's pistol, and expecting a shot in his back, for he felt that he deserved it.

With a light laugh at the man's haste, and rejoicing at having so cleverly turned the tables against his foe, Little Grit took up his saddle once more and started at a quick trot for the thicket, in which he found a long-bodied white horse hitched to a sapling.

"Holy smoke! it is my own horse, Prairie Gull, they stole from me some months ago; ha! ha! old horse, have I got you once more," and the boy threw his arms affectionately around the neck of the truly splendid animal, who recognized his young master with low neighs of delight.

Unhitching him, and taking off the accouterments of the outlaw, Little Grit threw his own light saddle upon the back of Prairie Gull, and sprung upon his back, and away dashed the bridleless horse, spinning along from the scene of the burned station, and proving to his young rider that he had not been injured by his short change of masters.

"One hour and forty-five minutes behind Jockey Jack's schedule time," he said, drawing a small gold watch from his pocket, and glancing at the time by the moonlight, while his splendid horse, seemingly rejoicing to be again flying along under the Express satchels, ran with a speed that hurled the miles rapidly behind him.

It was a rough piece of road between Mustang Pete's station and the one fifteen miles beyond, but Prairie Gull seemed worthy of his name, and over hill, lowland, and down dale he ran with the same ease and swiftness, his hoofs seeming hardly to touch the ground.

Presently there arose a hill before them that the Wild Rider knew would give him a view of the station ahead, and he peered anxiously forward, while a shout broke from his lips as he saw that it still stood, and that the outlaws had not yet visited it.

But, as he looked he saw far down in the lowlands on his right, a group of horsemen coming on at a gallop, the station evidently being their destination.

"On, Gull, on! we must save old Barney," he cried, and encouraged by the words of his rider Prairie Gull seemed to fairly fly, and in a few moments dashed up to the stockade.

"Quick, Barney! the outlaws are striking the stations, so get out your stock and strike for the hills," shouted Little Grit, as he dismounted from his panting horse, and seized upon one of the animals in the pen, and which he knew to be a fast runner.

"Waal, waal! what's ther matther afther bein'?" cried a voice, with a tinge of the Emerald Isle in it, and Barney the stock-tender came hustling out of the cabin, his rifle in hand.

"The outlaws are raiding the Pony Stations; Jockey Jack's been killed and I'm riding for him; Mustang Pete's dead, and his cabin in ashes, and yonder up the valley come a gang for you, Barney," said the Wild Rider rapidly.

"I'm damned if they gets me, my foine boy, or ther critters either, for I'm off with ther four legs ter onst," answered the old Irishman, and throwing his saddle and bridle on his favorite nag, and taking a few things out of his cabin, he mounted and rode out of the stockade, just as the half-dozen horsemen came in sight, not two hundred yards away.

"How's Leatherlegs's wind, Barney?" called out Little Grit.

"Good as a hound's, youngster."

"Then I'll give those fellows a check, and you'll have more time to escape."

"You're a brave young'un, mavourneen," said Barney, and he dashed up the canyon near the cabin, while Little Grit, with loud cries darted directly toward the advancing horsemen.

Instantly they came to a halt, and then quickly sought the cover of a clump of trees, until they saw that the boy was alone, and then they charged forth to meet him, firing their revolvers as they came.

Little Grit would have wheeled and ridden on up the pony trail, but he suddenly realized that he did not have one of his own well-trained horses under him, that he had taught to run without a bridle, and with regret he saw that Leatherlegs would not turn back at his command.

"Well, go right through, brute," he cried, and with a revolver in each hand and a loud yell, he spurred right into the midst of the horsemen.

There were rapid shots fired, a fall of a man and a horse, loud curses, shouts, and then a ringing cry, as the Wild Rider, unhurt, dashed on.

"The Wild Rider!"

The cry rung out loud from the lips of an outlaw who had recognized him, and unmindful of their fallen comrade, the party

started in pursuit, a dismounted man, whose horse had been killed, following on the steed of his slain companion.

"Now show your heels, you devill!" said Little Grit, grimly, and he sunk his spurs into Leatherlegs in no pleasant humor, and after hard work turned him in the direction he wished to go, though he was now far off the regular Pony Express Trail.

But Leatherlegs, from sheer fright, seemed stubborn, and darted up a mountain path, that Little Grit knew terminated abruptly at a cliff that overhung the deep river, fifty feet beneath.

"Great God! he'll kill us both," cried Wild Rider; but looking behind and seeing that his pursuers were pressing him hard, he continued on up the hillside.

"I was a fool not to bridle him, that I might break his jaw," muttered the youth, as the flying animal, having gained the summit, sped along the rocky ridge with frightful rapidity.

To spring off among the rocks would result in broken limbs, if not instant death, and the youth knew that there was but one way to get down the mountain, and that was by the path he had come, and behind him, not sixty yards, came the outlaws in hot chase.

No, there was another way—*off the cliff to the river below.*

"It is fifty good feet, but I'll risk it," he muttered, through his teeth.

But as he settled himself well for the leap Leatherlegs began to slacken his pace, as if well knowing what was before him.

"On! on! you brute! you shall not fail me again," cried the boy, and he drove the spurs into the flanks of the steed, and with shouts urged him again into a full run.

But again the frightened horse slackened his speed to once more spring forward with a snort of rage and pain, as he felt the keen point of the youth's knife pricking his back.

"Aha! I am master now, if I drive you to kill us both," said the youth, and as the cliff barren of trees and jutting out over the river, came in view, he added:

"Our trail lies on the other bank, old horse, and you'll have saved ten miles by the jump; *if you do not take us both to death.*"

And again the horse slackened, but again did knife, spur and shout urge him on, and with a frantic snort he bounded into the air and took the mighty leap, while, horrified at the act, the outlaws drew rein suddenly and uttered loud exclamations of amazement and admiration.

Once free from the cliff, and Leatherlegs drew himself up in a heap and with his fearless rider sitting upright in the saddle went down like a rock, and the outlaws heard the loud report as he struck the river.

Down beneath the dark waters sunk steed and rider, and for what seemed a long time the river closed above them; but then up above the surface they came, and as the splendid animal, unhurt, but frantic with fright, struck out for the shore the outlaws heard the ringing shout that came from the triumphant youth, and hastening to the cliff gazed upon him as he sped along on the trail, his mocking laughter rebounding with many an echo from the rocks.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SPIRIT OF THE CANYON.

I WILL now return to the heroine of my story, pretty Bessie Benton, who, my kind reader will remember, was thrown heavily to the ground, and who lay unconscious on the green sward, as the Spirit of the Canyon rode up.

Had Bessie not been insensible, she would have seen a slender form, graceful and lithe, spring quickly from the back of her snow-white steed, and approaching her, bend above her.

"Poor girl, I hope she is not injured; but I was determined to capture her," said a soft voice, and, as she passed her hands rapidly over the form of the prostrate girl, she added:

"No bones are broken, and I will soon restore her to consciousness."

Diligently she set to work, and presently Bessie awoke from insensibility to find bending over her a face of rare beauty, yet with a stern look that seemed out of place upon the fair features.

She was clad in white, her robe was loose and flowing, and a veil of gauzy material, encircled her head, and could be drawn at will across her face, giving her a ghastly appearance.

Noticing Bessie start and shrink from her, she said quickly:

"Do not fear me, for I will not harm you."

"Who are you?" asked Bessie, in a low tone.

"An outcast."

The tone was bitter, the word had a disagreeable sound, and it brought pity rather than fear from the stock-tender's daughter, for she said earnestly, while now fully recovered, she arose to her feet:

"I am sorry for you."

"Don't pity me, for I deserve not the pity of the good and pure; you are Bessie Benton I believe?"

"Yes."

"Your father is Daniel Benton, a stock-tender for the Pony Express Company?"

"He is."

"Why does he remain in this wild land?"

"He is poor, and sought here to make a living for himself and child."

"A living on the poor pittance he receives as stock-tender?"

"It is sufficient for our wants."

"Is he not a miner, too?"

"Yes."

"And has found gold?"

"No, he has been particularly unfortunate in his gold-digging."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes."

"Girl! would you lie to me?" and the strange woman laid her hand upon Bessie's arm.

"How dare you, because you are false yourself, accuse me of wrong?" said Bessie, indignantly.

"Pardon me—I deserve your rebuke, and I believe you; but it is strange that a man of education, such as I know your father to be, and who has a daughter whose beauty would make her a belle in any land, should remain in this wild country, throwing away his time for a few dollars a month."

"You know him, then?" asked Bessie, quickly.

"Yes, I have met him."

"He hopes to find gold, which will enable him to return home again and live in comfort."

"Why came he here?"

Bessie did not reply, and the woman again asked:

"Why did he come to this land?"

"Misfortune brought him here."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"It was not crime that drove him here?"

"Do you insult me because you have the power?"

"Forgive me again; if your father is not the pauper he seems, and if he is a criminal, hiding from justice, I believe you do not know it; but I am forced to take you with me."

"Whither?"

"Where do you think?"

After a moment of hesitation, Bessie replied:

"It is said that you are the ghost of a lady who was murdered in the Haunted Canyon, some years ago; but my good sense causes me to laugh at the superstition."

"Then why do you fly from me?"

"I will tell you—the bandits came to my father's house, and because he would not give his gold, which they said he had, up to them, they hanged him, and—"

"Do you mean this?" quickly asked the woman.

"Yes."

"He was hanged before your eyes?"

"Yes."

"And is dead?"

"Alas! I left him hanging to a beam in our cabin, while I started for Rocky Glen Station."

"For what purpose?"

"To rouse the miners to avenge him," was the almost savage reply,

"And you were there alone with your father when the bandits came?"

"Yes."

"Who led them?"

"A man they called Pet."

"Ah, he is a pet of Satan."

"You know him then?"

"Yes; but how did you escape from him?"

"The Wild Rider dashed up—"

"Ah!"

"Just as the man, Pet, ordered his followers to hang me, as they had my father, for they had the rope around my neck."

"And this Wild Rider rescued you?"

"He came into the cabin, and single handed attacked them, released me, and putting me on a horse sent me to Rocky Glen Station for help."

"Your station is not on his line of run?"

"No, not now that he has taken the longer run which broke the other riders down."

"Were they not a little afraid of me, the Spirit of the Canyon?"

"I think so; but Little Grit did not fear you."

"He fears nothing; and he has gone on along the trail?"

"Yes."

"If he escapes death he bears a charmed life, for I tell you frankly the stations for fifty miles are to be raided to-night."

"How know you this?"

"I have a way of finding out," was the significant reply.

"And yet, being a woman, you did not warn them of danger?" indignantly asked Bessie.

"It was not in my interest to do so," was the quiet response.

"How mean you?"

"I am a member of the Mountain Bandits!"

"You!"

"Yes; am I not vile enough to be anything?" was the bitter question.

"I had not suspected you of this; I have heard of the Spirit of the Canyon for a long time, but believed the Pony Riders were governed by their superstitious fancies until Wild Rider said he saw you."

"Yes, I tried to frighten him one night, but he gave chase at once, and I barely escaped him."

"But I cannot believe you belong to the Mountain Bandits."

"How else could I live in this wild region?"

"I know not; but I had not believed that of you."

"I told you I was wicked; but come, you are my prisoner."

"A prisoner to the bandits?" asked Bessie, in alarm.

"Yes; but I pledge you no harm shall befall you."

"You are but a woman, and what will they care for your word of command?"

"You shall see; come!"

"Oh, do let me go, for oh! I am so very wretched."

"You entreat in vain; you are a prize that may be found most valuable to me, but again I pledge you my word that no harm shall befall you."

Bessie buried her face in her hands and burst into tears, and looked up only when she felt a light touch upon her arm.

It was the Spirit of the Canyon, and by her side stood her snowy steed, and then the maiden saw the secret of the noiseless hoof-falls among the rocks.

His hoofs were muffled, and his tread gave back no sound.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE STOCK-VENDER'S STORY.

ROCKY GLEN was a scene of considerable excitement, shortly after noon on the day following the eventful night that opens my story, for much had transpired, even in the land of wild adventure and strange scene, to arouse the rude denizens of that border retreat.

Knowing by long and frequent experience that it would be impossible to overtake the Boy Bandit and his men, after Little Grit had come in and reported the pursuit of himself and Helen Hewlett, the miners had passed the night in gambling and discussing the advisability of raising a force of Vigilantes to hunt to death the curses of the Overland.

Had poor Bessie Benton arrived with her sad story, the entire population of Rocky Glen would have been up in arms, and over a hundred horsemen would have taken the trail at once; but the reader will remember, that the maiden had been run down by the Spirit of the Canyon, and could not bear the tidings to the station.

At dawn the gamblers sought rest, but a few hours after they were up again, when the news flew around that a train was coming into the hamlet, and Colonel Hewlett and his party, found a curious crowd to

greet them, as they rode up to the Riders' Rest.

"Ah, colonel, glad to see you back, sir," said the hospitable host of the tavern.

"Thank you, sir; I have come to ask for quarters for myself and daughter for a few days, as a courier has just overtaken me with orders to establish a new post, or fort, in this vicinity, and I shall at once select a site, for I am anxious to put down the lawlessness on this border."

"You will find it no easy task, colonel, as crime is deep-rooted here; but I can give you fair accommodations, and plenty to eat, as long as yourself and daughter are my guests."

"You look a little pale after your adventure last night, Miss Hewlett, and the judge ushered his guests into their rooms, the best two in the rambling, one-storied tavern."

Half an hour after the wagons were corraled on a piece of meadow-land, the soldiers, a small battalion, were encamped on the banks of a pleasant stream, and with the few emigrants that had come West with the train, to find new homes, the settlement of Rocky Glen presented a most stirring scene, and the gambling element, at the head of whom was the Kid Glove Sport, flattered themselves that they would now have some pigeons to pluck of their golden feathers.

After the noonday dinner at the Riders' Rest, the idle denizens of Rocky Glen were wont to assemble upon the natural lawn in front of the tavern for a smoke and gossip, and as many had not gone to work that day, in the mines and at their various other duties, there consequently had gathered a large crowd to discuss the late arrivals, the building of the new post, and other topics in which the settlers were interested.

"I tell yer, pards, thet Boy Bandit an' his gang is going to find it interestin' fer 'em now ther sogers hes comed, an' we hes a larger community o' folks," said Trumps, removing his Indian pipe from his mouth and looking around upon the crowd as though he had just made some very wise remark.

"I dunno, Trumps, if he are or not, for he's a screamer, an' nobody's got clutch on him yet, an' it's seldom any o' his pards is tuke in out o' ther wet," responded Bony Bob.

"They does say nobody knows who's ther gang, for it can turn out at times over half a hundred men, an' I has allus noticed when they was raidin' in force thet fellows round heur were mighty scarce."

"You don't mean to assert, Trumps, that any of our citizens here are secret members of the Boy Bandit's band?" said the Kid Glove Sport, removing a cigar from between

his lips with his daintily gloved hand, and looking fixedly into the miner's face.

"I does say as how thet thar were a 'thin-nin' out o' folks in Rocky Glen both times the Boy Bandit made a grand raid on ther southern trails; why, you wasn't heur yer-self, Kid Gloves, ary time."

"Am I to understand that you mean to imply that I, being absent from here at the times you speak of, am a secret member of the Boy Bandit's band?" and the Kid Glove Sport arose, and his eyes burned menacingly.

"If ther shoe I gi'n yer fits, my festive pard, yer can jis put it on an' wear it," was Trump's cool reply, but before an angry retort could be made by the Kid Glove Sport, a man suddenly appeared in their midst, and from his lips came the trembling words:

"Men—my child—have you seen her?"

It was Daniel Benton, and his face was haggard, white, and stamped with both mental and bodily pain, while around his neck were the cruel marks of the lariat with which he had been strung up the night before.

"Yer child, yer gal, Dan—whar is she?" asked Trumps, quickly turning to the stock-tender, who was well known at Rocky Glen.

"Yes, Trumps, she started for this place last night to tell you all of the cutrages the bandits were committing along the line—where is she?" eagerly said the sorrowing father.

"Yes; they captured Miss Hewlett, the daughter of the officer who has come to build the new fort, and Little Grit had a brush with them, and then started to ride Jockey Jack's run, as they had killed that poor fellow," said Judge Hunter, coming forward.

"Alas! that is not all they have done, I tell you. Little Grit came to my cabin to find me strung up to a beam, and my daughter about to be served the same way, because we would not tell where we hid our gold; but that brave lad boldly attacked the half-dozen bandits, rescued Bessie, and sent her here to give warning, and frightening off the outlaws he cut me down ere I died, and I owe him my life."

"I waited, my friends, a long time, and then, as none of you came, I grew anxious about my child, and have come on foot all the way to seek her, for, alas! what has befallen her?" and the stock tender gazed anxiously around the crowd.

"Your pretty daughter has not come here, Benton, so harm must have befallen her, and I will lead to her rescue, if the boys will follow. Hol pards, to the rescue of pretty Bessie Benton," and the Kid Glove Sport waved his hat around his head and a hundred voices shouted a glad response to follow him.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN IMPORTANT ARRIVAL.

THE excitement of the Rocky Glen settlers at the story of the stock-tender was intense for a few moments, for Bessie Benton was well known there, and her bright eyes had pierced many a brave heart with love arrows, and one and all were most anxious to aid in her capture, for, if she had not fallen into the hands of the bandits, what had befallen her?

Forgetting his angry words with Trumps, the Kid Glove Sport asked that big-hearted miner to aid him in forming a search party, and within half an hour's time fifty men had assembled before the Riders' Rest, all of them mounted and well armed, and at their head was Gambler Grey, Trumps, and Daniel Benton, who, in spite of his long run on foot, and his sufferings, insisted upon going, and had been furnished with one of the Pony Express horses by Judge Hunter.

Just as they were about to start, a young and handsome lieutenant of cavalry rode up, and said politely:

"Gentlemen, Colonel Hewlett has learned of your proposed expedition, and has ordered me to take thirty men and accompany you, and I would advise that half of my cavalrymen go with your leader, and half of your party with me."

The Kid Glove Sport frowned a little at this proposition; but seemingly thinking it best not to act against the military, he replied:

"I command this party, sir, and will accede to the colonel's wishes, though I do not think such a large force necessary, as the bandits cannot possibly number over thirty men."

"You know best, sir, as I am a stranger here; but I have heard that the outlaw organization is a large one, and is commanded by a boy who is a remarkable leader; here come my men, and the sergeant and fifteen men can accompany you, and you can assign me those you think best," said the lieutenant politely, though it was evident that he did not like the gambler, for his manner and look said as much.

The parties were then divided, Trumps and twenty-five miners being assigned to the command of the young and dashing lieutenant, and the two squadrons were about to start on their separate trails of search, when the clatter of hoofs resounded in the timber that covered a distant hill and the next instant there swept into view a horseman coming at full speed.

"Old Barney, the stock-tender!" cried Daniel Benton, and all eyes were upon him as he came flying along the trail, and the

next instant drew rein before the tavern door.

"Howly Moses! is it a wake yez is afther going to?" he cried, gazing around him.

"Yes, Barney, if you will find us the corpse and the whisky," answered the Kid Glove Sport.

"Faith an' I will find yez the corpus, but divil a bit o' poteen do yez get out o' me, for me throat is failin' now as though I'd swallowed a cat an' drug him out by ther tail, an' it's a wee drop I nade before I can say a wurrud."

"And what have you to say, Barney?" asked Judge Hunter, coming forward with a bottle and tin cup in his hand.

"I'll be afther sp'akin' in a minute, joodge; ah! blissid drap o' the critter, thet refreshes me in'ards, now I kin find the tongue o' me."

"Well, speak quick, for there are stirring rumors abroad, and the men are anxious to start on the trail of the bandits," said the judge.

"Stirring rumors! well, I'd be afther sayin' that same meself, fer ther bandits is preparing corpses fer a dozen wakes; yer see, gintlemin, I'm a stock-tinder three stations beyant here, an' I was a-wonderin' last night regardin' ther delay o' Jockey Jack, whin up dashed thet Wild Rider o' Satin, Little Grit, an' he shouts out thet I'd better skip to ther mountains, as ther bandits was afther comin', an' I till yez, gintlemin, I did thet same with my stock, while thet yoong divil a-hossback, jumped on thet Satin o' ther crib, Litherligs, an' charged ther bandits."

"Will, I says, from ther narrer path av ther hill, thet he wint right over thim--an' some wint down, an' thin he turned Litherligs fer ther hill, an' says I to meself, says I, 'thet boy is after bein' gone now, Wild Rider thet he is.'"

"Will, gintlemin, I was a liar, fer he wint along ther cliff pathway, as I seen from ther mountain above, an' when Litherligs wanted ter stop, knowin' what was afore him, he jist lit upon ther baste with spur an' yill, an' over thet cliff he wint!"

"Great God! Little Grit dead?" cried Judge Hunter, while exclamations of horror and regret arose on all sides.

"Di'd! who said the boy was di'd?" asked Barney.

"He rode over the Jacob's Ladder cliff, you said," remarked the Kid Glove Sport.

"And so did he, but he's not di'd, nor even hurted."

"Hoorah! Hoorah! for Little Grit," yelled Trumps, and the cheers were given with a will.

"No, gintlemin, the Litherligs struck the wather same as ef he bu'st open, an' they

wint under thergither, an' says I to mesilf, says I, 'They hes gone to ther divil, now.'

"But it was afther bein' a lie I will have to ask fergiveness for, as they comed up beautiful, ther Wild Rider gived a yill, an' thin laughed as ef he'd enj'yed the bath, an' away wint Litherligs along ther trail, having cut off many a mile by the joomp.

"Will, gintlemin, I hid ther stock in ther mountains till nixt day, an' thin comed back ter find my home burnt, an' I corrals ther horses an' coomes on here, ter find Mustang Pate di'd at his burnt cabin, an' ther home o' Dan Binton there desarted o' human an' critter, 'ceptin' a few dead corpuses."

"And you have seen no bandits on the way?" asked Gambler Grey.

"Not the divil o' one, 'ceptin' ther di'd ones."

"And no nuthin' of the Wild Rider?"

"Divil a bit o' that ridin' imp, savin' what I was afther tellin' yez, bedad! listen to thim huffs!"

All listened, and again came the clatter of hoofs coming along the rocky path through the timber, and the next instant a wild yell burst from every throat, hats were waved, and pistols discharged, for into full view came *Little Grit, the Wild Rider!*

CHAPTER XV.

THE DEPARTURES.

HAVING given vent to their wild enthusiasm at the return of Little Grit, a silence fell upon all as he came toward them, Prairie Gull reeking with foam, the flanks red, and the panting nostrils showing how hard had been the race.

"How in thunder was he afther gittin' thet hoss o' his?" cried Barney; but before reply could be made Little Grit drew rein in their midst, and sprung to the ground at the tavern door, while another ringing cheer greeted him.

"Welcome back, my boy; Barney has told us of the lean from the cliff, and you are indeed the Wild Rider of the Border," cried Judge Hunter, grasping the youth by the hand.

Though haggard-looking, dust-covered and evidently greatly fatigued, Little Grit had not lost his nerve, and said, pleasantly:

"I thank you, my friends, for the greeting you give me, and I am glad to see that you are ready for the trail, for the tenders and stock have been driven from three of the stations, and the bandits are abroad in force, as I sent you word by Bessie Benton last night."

"But my child never came, Little Grit; she has been captured or killed," said Dan

Benton, riding forward and addressing the youth, who exclaimed:

"She did not reach Rocky Glen, you say?"

"No."

"Then she has been taken, and it is the duty of all men here to go to her rescue."

"We were about setting forth on that duty when your arrival detained us, boy," said the Kid Glove Sport, and Trumps spoke up quickly:

"Don't call Little Grit *boy*, Kid Gloves, for he are a man clear through."

"He's a boy who has too much to say for one of his years," retorted the Gambler.

"And one day I'll have something to say to you, Grey," said Little Grit, with a flash in his eyes, and turning to the young lieutenant he continued, unnoticing the hum that went around at his words to the Gambler.

"I have ridden Jockey Jack's circuit, sir, and shall at once start on my own and report what harm, if any, has been done to the north; now three Pony Stations, are without stock, but I went to the hills, where Barney's horses are and got Prairie Gull, or I could not have made the run as I did."

"Do you mean, Little Grit, that you have made Jockey Jack's full run there and back?" asked the judge.

"Yes, sir, and am on time, though I met with considerable detention," answered the youth, with a quiet smile of triumph.

"I should think so," and turning to the officer, the judge continued:

"Lieutenant, this young man left here thirty-six hours ago on his run, ninety miles and back, and when he arrived last night, and Jockey Jack was killed, he made his trip, and is back on time, and you have heard what he has gone through with."

"He deserves the greatest credit, and I should advise that he seek rest now," responded Lieutenant Harold Trask.

"I must start out at once, sir, on my run," replied Little Grit, modestly.

"But you cannot stand it."

"Ah, sir, we pony riders are hardy fellows and can stand a great deal, and I must stand this one, for there is no one to take my place; but, boys, let me hear on my return that Bessie Benton has been rescued and her captors punished."

"We'll string 'em up, Rider," shouted Trumps.

"Then good by; come, Firefly, we must be off," and the stable boy having led his splendid black around, and changed the saddle from Prairie Gull to his back, the youth mounted, and waving his hand, sped away on his long run, while, the cheer that went after him having died away, Judge Hunter said in enthusiastic tones:

"If Wild Rider comes back on time to-morrow he will have ridden nearly *five hundred miles in fifty hours*, and ridden thirty-five horses in doing so."*

"Come, we have no time to discuss the powers of endurance of boys; let us be off," said the Kid Glove Sport, evidently annoyed at the praise bestowed upon the daring youth and he rode on, followed by his squadron, while Lieutenant Harold Trask and his party struck off on another trail, which Trumps who acted as guide, thought best for them to take.

"God grant they be successful."

The soft, sweet voice caused Judge Hunter to turn quickly, and he beheld by his side Helen Hewlett, who, from her window in the tavern, had heard all that passed, and seeing the rescue party ride away, came out and joined her host.

"So I say, Miss Hewlett, for Bessie Benton is as lovely in face and form as you are, and I know possesses a noble character," replied the blunt judge, and his outspoken compliment, though not intended to flatter, brought the rich color to Helen's lips, while she replied:

"Then I pity her from my inmost heart, in the power of those wretches, who I heard her father say would have hanged her, had it not been for—for the young man you call Little Grit, and who so nobly served me."

"Yes, they are a bad set of men, and their boy leader shows no mercy to men or women, I have heard, and know, Miss Hewlett, and I fear yonder men go to her rescue in vain, and will have to leave her to another to bring back."

"And that other is—"

"The Wild Rider."

"Then why did he not go with them to-day?"

"Because his duty called him to make the ride, Jockey Jack being dead and Tiny Tim sick abed; but at the other end of the line he will report the affairs, and the agent will send other riders here, as Little Grit told me he intended to lay off for a couple of weeks, and egad, he deserves to."

"I should think so; but when will he return, judge?"

"To morrow at ten he is due, miss."

"And will he make the marvelous run?"

"He will, or die in his saddle, for I know the boy."

"Then tell me, please, who he is."

* * Hon. W. F. Cody, Buffalo Bill, when a boy, and riding Pony Express, once under a pressure of circumstances rode the run of two riders without rest—from Red Buttes to Three Crossing, and thence on to Rocky Ridge; then immediately back again to Red Buttes—a distance of 324 miles, over a wild country, in thirty hours, and using twenty-four horses.—THE AUTHOR.

"Little Grit, the Wild Rider, is all I can tell you, Miss Hewlett," and the judge turned away, leaving Helen with a look of disappointment upon her fair face.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PHANTOMS.

MOUNTED on his favorite Firefly, the fleetest of his stable of twenty horses, for Little Grit owned the animals he rode, the Wild Rider went along like the wind.

First down into the lowlands he went, then over a ridge of foothills, and out upon the prairie; past the tree at the head of the Red Ravine, where a human body and the horses he had killed still lay unburied, and serving for food for wolves and vultures, and then on to the spot where he had rescued Helen Hewlett, and where another body and another steed lay dead as a feast for wild beasts.

"The fellow had not the heart to bury his own friend," muttered the youth, as he turned his face away from the sickening sight of hungry coyotes feeding upon a human being.

But not once did he slacken his speed, until he ran into the station where he changed horses.

But no animal stood at the stockade-gate awaiting him, and the stock-tender was not visible.

"Ho, Bart! where are you?" cried the youth.

But no answer came to his cry, and dismounting, he drew his revolver and entering the stockade, slowly approached the cabin, the door of which was ajar.

As he was about to thrust the door open and enter, a sudden impulse caused him to stop, and removing his sombrero, he placed it on the muzzle of his revolver and held it around the post, as though he were peeping in.

Instantly there came a ringing report and the hat fell to the ground, pierced by a bullet, while with a groan Wild Rider sprang back to the corner of the hut.

The feigned groan of agony did the work, for out of the cabin darted a human form, to fall dead with a bullet in his heart.

"It is Hank Hawkins; now I'll see what devil's work he has been at," muttered Wild Rider, as he recognized the man whom the night before he had rescued Helen Hewlett from.

Cautiously entering the cabin, the youth saw Bart, the stock-tender, and an old, gray-haired man lying dead by the hearth and knew that Hank Hawkins had killed him to rob him, and then drive the pony horses off to the hills.

Springing upon Firefly, he followed the

trail of the animals for half a mile and found them hitched in a small growth of timber.

"He thought he had it all his own way; but he should have been more particular to find out if my head was under that hat."

"Come, Arrow, we must be off, and you will have to make up half an hour of lost time," and throwing his saddle and Express sachel upon a thoroughbred-looking bay, Wild Rider drove Firefly and the other horses back to the stockade.

"Now to bury poor old Bart," he said, and he set to work with pick and spade, and quickly made a grave back of the cavern and in it deposited the body of the old stock-tender.

"Guess you'll make prime eating for coyotes," he muttered, as he threw the body of the outlaw outside of the stockade, and fastening the gate, sprung upon Arrow, who shot away as though he had been sent from a bow.

Urging the red bay hard, Little Grit arrived at the next station only a quarter of an hour behind time, and to his delight learned from the stock-tender that the bandits had not paid him a visit.

"You are lucky, Bond, for they have hit the line hard below Rocky Glen, run Barney off, slain Mustang Pete, captured Bessie Benton, and nearly killed her father, while they shot poor Jockey Jack on the run, and I buried Bart at the back station," he said to the man, who held a fiery mare in readiness for him.

"Guess your time will come next, Little Grit, for you is awful venturesome," said Bond the stock-tender.

"Somehow I don't think so, Bond; I'll not say die as long as I can show my claws."

"Good-by, and keep a good lookout."

"I will, Little Grit; but hain't yer a leetle stiff, and lookin' bad?"

"I should think so, for I've done treble work; but I'll be back on time, if the lamp of life holds out to burn. Come, Sathness!"

The last was said to the really vicious mare, who bounded away with an angry snort, and at a speed that threatened to make up the twenty minutes lost.

Bond stood watching Little Grit until he disappeared from sight and then muttered:

"He are rightly named, for he are a Wild Rider fer a fact; but ther end o' his road will come yet, I'm thinking, though I hopes not, as he are a better man than ary boy I ever see afore; I wonder ef he'll be back on time?"

"I'm thinkin' not, an' I'm bettin' myself thet leetle drop o' rum I has left in ther bottle, thet he don't make it; ef he does, I'll jist pour it out on ther ground, fer he don't drink, an' ef he don't make it, I'll drink ther

last drop; thet's ther way I has o' bettin' ag'in' myself," and Bond, the stock-tender, went in and looked to his arms, for he was a cautious man.

But no bandits paid him a visit that night, and the next morning, after his lonely breakfast, he led Arrow out to the stockade, and then went into the cabin and brought out his old clock and a bottle.

"Thar's ther time as ther sun sets an' rises by, an' heur are a drink o' rum in this bottle thet are wu'th a pound o' yaller gold-dust ter me."

"Let me see; ther boy hes jist five minutes ter come in an' be on time; but I won't be mean, so will give him another minute."

"Then comes my drink, an' it are a good one too, cl'ar four fingers in a tin cup; but I'll suck it out o' ther bottle, fer it are sw'ater."

A while he was silent, and then said aloud, while his eyes glanced at the bottle longingly, and his fingers moved nervously, as though anxious to clutch it with loving embrace:

"It are four minutes gone—only one and one-half minute now; yas, only one minute now—"

"Holy Sierras! but thar he comes!"

The man sprung to his feet, and turning his eyes up the trail saw the roan mare coming on at full speed for the station, and upon her back was the Wild Rider; but he was not riding, as was his wont, upright and free, but crouching in his seat, and seemed holding to the mane of the fairly flying animal.

"Hold hard, Leetle Grit! heur yer is, or I are a liar, an' my rum hes ter be drunk up by ther 'arth; but what in 'arnal thunder are ther matter with yer, boy?"

"I'm dead beat, Bond; I've had a hard run of it; there, let me down easy, and help me on Firefly," said the youth, in almost a whisper.

"You is nigh played, Leetle Grit, fer yer face looks ten years older than usual, an' yer is stiff as though yer had rheumatiz, while yer eyes seems rollin' ag'in' ther back part o' yer head; let me run in with ther bags, boy, an' you stay heur an' rest."

"No; I must go myself, thank you, Bond."

"Then take this wee drop o' mount'in-dew, pararer tanglefoot, miner's benzine, or whatever yer call it, fer I has lost it, havin' bet ag'in' myself that yer wouldn't make ther run, but yer has, an' half a minute to spare."

"Take it, boy, an' it'll ile yer j'int's, fetch yer eyes in place ag'in, warm ther cockles on yer heart, an' fill yer full o' glory, fer it are prime mater'al, from Judge Hunter's stock."

"I will drink it, Bond, and thank you,

for I need it; there, I feel better, and there is some left for you; now help me on, an', Firefly, go easy at first, or you'll shake me in pieces."

The next instant the Wild Rider was again mounted and speeding along swiftly, Firefly hurling the miles behind him until a word from the Wild Rider brought him to a sudden halt.

And no wonder, for in the road ahead of him, just under the tree at the head of the Red Ravine were a horse and rider, who, even in the glare of day, looked like spectral forms from another world.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE COMPACT.

THE first act of the Wild Rider, after bringing his horse to a halt, was to draw his revolver, and then take a close survey of the phantom-like horse and rider in his path-way.

"It is the one they call the Spirit of the Canyon, and a woman; come, Firefly, let us have a closer look at the pair," muttered Little Grit, who was greatly strengthened by the liquor he had been given by Bond.

The horse slowly moved forward, and yet like statues, the white horse and its rider remained, until Little Grit had approached within thirty feet, still holding his revolver in his hand.

Then the white steed faced him, and the rider said, in a clear, musical tone:

"Put up your weapon, for I mean you no harm."

"I do not fear you; only you are uncomfortably near the ravine, which might conceal a company of cavalry," replied Wild Rider.

"Then I will come to you, and I trust you, as I wish you to trust me; see, I show no arms," and with her hands held above her head the woman known as the Spirit of the Canyon, advanced slowly to where the youth had halted.

"Who are you?" he asked, gazing fixedly upon her white-robed form and partially veiled face.

"I am called the Spirit of the Canyon."

"True, and as such frighten the superstitious fearfully."

"Yet you do not fear me?"

"Why should I when I have no belief in the supernatural? It is that pistol in your belt that I stand in awe of."

"Ah!" and the woman drew her robe over the tell-tale weapon, while Little Grit, at the movement of her hand to her waist, quickly dropped his upon his revolver.

"You doubt me, I see."

"Why should I do otherwise, when you

go masquerading by day and night along the trail I ride?"

"You are a brave youth not to draw off the Pony Line at the threats you have received."

"Why should I? as long as there is life there is hope, and I take my chances."

"And fearful chances they are."

"I care not; I came to ride this line for a certain time and I shall do it," was the bold remark of Little Grit.

"If Death does not catch you."

"Yes, but I have ridden in company with Death so often we have become good pards."

"Why do you ride Pony Express?" suddenly asked the woman.

"My reasons hold no interest for you."

"You are mistaken; but we will not argue that now, as I wish you to do me a favor."

"Wish me to do you a favor?" asked the youth, in surprise.

"Yes."

"How can I?"

"I will tell you. You know Bessie Benton, the stock-tender's daughter, I believe?"

"Yes, what know you of her?" asked Wild Rider, with eagerness.

"She is a prisoner."

"That I feared; then the Rocky Glen boys have not rescued her?"

"Hal hal hal their errand is as futile as their attempt to capture the Boy Bandit."

"I do not know but that Bessie can be rescued and the Boy Bandit captured, too," said Little Grit, confidently.

"No, neither can be done unless I wish it," said the woman, solemnly.

"You! What have you to do with it?"

"Much. I will prove it by saying that you can accomplish what the Vigilantes and soldiers from Rocky Glen have failed to do."

"And what is that?"

"Rescue Bessie Benton."

"I intend to try, at least."

"You can accomplish it with ease through me."

"How?"

"You have just come from a long ride, and your face shows that you suffer, so go on to Rocky Glen and seek rest until tomorrow night, when the Vigilantes will be back."

"Then go to the cabin of Daniel Benton, and tell him that if he is willing to give ten thousand dollars for the restoration of his daughter you will bring her to him."

"Why, he has not a hundred dollars to his name."

"You do as I say, and he will give you the money."

"I say he has no money."

"And I say he will give you the amount I name, and I wish you to bring it to the Pilot Tree in the middle of the Sweetbrier Prairie."

"I know the spot; but why there?"

"That you may not be treacherously dealt with; as you leave the foot-hills on the north I will leave the timber on the south, and Bessie Benton shall accompany me."

"You promise this?"

"Yes."

"At what time to-morrow night?"

"Meet me at midnight."

"The Pilot Tree will conceal a dozen men."

"True, but if you doubt me get the money before night and go there by daylight though I cannot come until midnight; then you can see that an ambush is not intended."

"So be it; I will trust you; but if I do not bring the money?"

"You cannot have the girl."

"I'll risk that."

"Then our arrangement ends here, unless you pledge yourself not to attempt the rescue of Bessie Benton if you do not get the money."

"At that time, yes, I pledge myself; but look out for squalls afterward."

"I'll be on my guard; how we understand each other?"

"Yes; but how did you get possession of Bessie?"

"I captured her."

"And who are you?"

"The Spirit of the Canyon I told you; but mind you, do not speak of my meeting you to any one, nor tell how you rescued Bessie; will you promise this?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then, good-by," and wheeling her white horse the woman rode down into the Red Ravine, while Little Grit went skimming along once more on his way to Rocky Glen, deeply impressed by his meeting with the strange creature and what he had heard, and determined to keep his word and engagement with her, though every bone and muscle in his body ached, and he was almost blind from loss of sleep.

CHAPTER XVII.

WILD RIDER ON TIME.

"By Heaven! there comes the boy, and on time, or I am a sinner!" and Judge Hunter, who had been anxiously gazing down the trail, danced around in his glee, as he saw Firefly come bounding along toward the tavern.

His words brought to the rude piazza both Colonel Hewlett and Helen, besides all who

were loafing in the bar-room, and every eye was upon the Wild Rider as he came in on the home stretch.

"He's not riding in his old easy style, and no wonder," said the judge, as he called to the stable man to call up Tiny Tim to send on the next run.

"No wonder, sir, if he has made the four hundred and sixty odd miles, you say, in fifty hours," said Colonel Hewlett.

"My life that he's made the clean run, and of all the gamblers here, there are not three bets against him," cried the judge, as he sprung down from the steps and grasped the hand of the Wild Rider, just as Firefly came to a halt.

"Great God! what a changel!" cried the colonel aloud, while Judge Hunter said, anxiously:

"You made it, my boy?"

"Yes; but can Tiny Tim go on?"

"Oh, yes, though he's not well; any news?"

"Poor Bart is dead; killed by Hank Hawkins, Colonel Hewlett, from whom I saved your daughter: but I avenged him."

"Here, judge, lift me down lightly, please for I am worse beat than a stove-up government mule."

"You are game to the backbone, Little Grit. Steady, boys, for don't you see him wince with pain, and he's no child to cry out at an ache; there, now take him into my room."

The two men who had lifted Little Grit from his saddle, obeyed, just as Tiny Tim, a small, wiry man with a clean-shaven, determined face, came out to mount an iron-gray that the stable-boy was holding for him.

"Look out for squalls, Tim, and ride hard," called out Little Grit, catching sight of him.

"All right, lad, and the whole line shall hear of what you have done; good-by all!" and away went the iron gray with Tiny Tim and the Express bags on his back, while the Wild Rider was carried into the hotel and cared for by willing hands.

"Helen, that boy's face haunts me by day and night, and recalls memories from the past, that I had hoped were forever buried," said Colonel Hewlett, as himself and daughter returned to their room.

"I felt that something must have influenced you deeply, father, to have seemed so unkind to him as you were the other night," replied the maiden.

"Something did influence me, my child; something I never expected to speak to you about, but which I will now tell you of, as I must speak to some one about it, must find out who that boy is."

"You are aware that in early life, a year

before you were born, I was engaged in a duel?"

"Yes, father, there were plenty of busy tongues to tell me of it at school, though you never spoke to me of the painful circumstance, and if it is unpleasant to you to recall, do not tell me now."

"I say I must, Helen, for I am deeply troubled."

"Before I met your mother I loved a young and beautiful girl that I had fairly idolized from her childhood, for our families were on most intimate terms, and in Virginia, where I lived, our estates adjoined."

"When she was but sixteen we became engaged, and were to have been married upon my return from the West, where I was ordered for a year's service among the Indians."

"A young man I met in service in the West, a surgeon of my regiment, had a fortune left him, and shortly after my arrival at the command, resigned and was to start home, when my horse fell with me one day, and my arm being broken, he remained to set it, and kindly cared for me for several weeks."

"I was so attached to him that I gave him a letter to my family, and to Corinne, for his home was on the Maryland side of the Potomac, not far above where I lived."

"Alas! my child, he used that letter of introduction so well, that he won my intended bride from me, with stories of my wild life and gambling, and more, he persuaded Corinne to run away with him and become his wife."

"My child, I am, as you know, of a hot-headed nature, and I did not allow this false friend's treachery to go unpunished, but two years after tracked him down, and he fell in a duel with me."

"What became of Corinne I never knew, or cared, for some months after I saved from drowning in the surf at Newport, a young girl who afterward became my wife, and your mother, Helen, and the image of that treacherous woman I took out of my heart forever."

"Now, my child, up from the grave, as though it was Lester Lamdell himself, comes this boy they call Wild Rider, and when I look at him, the image of false Corinne rises before me, and I would take my oath *that he is their son*," and, as though to shut out the phantoms of the past from before his eyes, Colonel Hewlett buried his face in his hands and leaned on the table before him, while Helen, with deep sympathy, said:

"Father, I hope that such may not be the case, that it is only a fancied resemblance; but I will solve the mystery for you, as to who this Wild Rider really is, and if he be

their son," then let us go from here; get ordered elsewhere, where constantly before you will not be one to call up only bitterest memories."

"No, Helen, as I have sown so will I reap; I was unkind to him, and I will not be again, for if I have much much to forgive, he has too, and he has heaped coals of fire upon my head by saving you from what I now know would have been worse than death."

"I will go now and see if I cannot help the boy, and you send to the Hospital steward and sutler for all that he may need," and having determined upon the course he would pursue Colonel Hewlett went to the room where Wild Rider had been taken; but at the door Judge Hunter met him with the report that he had been well cared for and was fast asleep.

CHAPTER XIX.

ON THE TRAIL.

IF Little Grit had seemed completely used up, upon his arrival at Rocky Glen, after his marvelous ride, he certainly did not look so when the next afternoon he came out on the piazza to welcome the parties back who had gone in search of Bessie Benton.

A little pale and haggard, a trifle stiff he seemed, but withal a dangerous person to grapple with in a close encounter, for his wiry frame had recuperated rapidly from the fearful strain put upon it.

"Couldn't find hair nor hide o' her, or ther bandits, Leetle Grit, tho' we seen your work lying round, an' a number o' us rode to ther cliff ter see ther leap yer tuk. Jewilikins! but it were a flyer!"

"An' they tells me yer made ther big run? Waal yer is ther boss rider an' leetle one in this heur sinful airth, an' no mistake," and Trumps warmly grasped the boy's hand, and then continued:

"We'll hev a leetle game o' keerds ter-night. Grit, my boy, an' I wants yer round, fer thar is a row pendin' atween me and thet Kid Glove Gambler, an' it are all about you."

"I am sorry I cannot be with you to-night, Trumps, but I have an important engagement on hand."

"Why, you isn't goin' fer ter ride ag'in right off?"

"No, but I have something to attend to that I cannot neglect, and the nature of which I hope you will know to-morrow; by the way, where did you leave Daniel Benton?"

"Oh! poor feller, he left us as soon as he c'u'dn't find his darter, an' he's gone back to her lonely cabing; I tell yer, Leetle Grit, I feels durned sorry fer thet man, an' more sorrier fer his darter, an' you and me will set

out ter-morrer an' look her up, ef yer kin spare time."

"Oh yes, for there will be several riders sent down here to-night, to take Jockey Jack's place, and give Tiny Tim and myself a rest for a few days; now I must be off."

"Don't want no comp'ny, does yer?"

"Not this time, thank you, my good friends; I shall ride Firefly, and these will go with me," and Little Grit smilingly patted his belt of arms.

"They is durned good comp'ny fer yer too, or I are a liar; waal, yer knows my shanty, so look me up when I kin sarve yer, and, Leetle Grit, keep yer eyes on that Kid Glove gerloot, fer he hes it in him ter give yer trouble."

"I believe with you, Trumps, that he needs watching, and I'll keep an eye upon him," and Little Grit went into the tavern to get ready for his ride.

Ten minutes after he came out on the pine-board piazza, looking exceedingly trim in appearance, for he had donned a new suit, and Helen Hewlett, who sat at the window, mentally observed that she never saw a handsomer youth.

"You are not going on another ride, Mr. Little Grit," she said pleasantly.

"Yes, but I am not riding on time this afternoon, Miss Hewlett."

"I feared you would be very ill, when I saw you lifted from your horse yesterday, and my father was anxious to serve you in some way; but you look well this afternoon."

"Oh, yes, Miss Hewlett, I am all right now, and a short ride will limber me up; but I have to thank you and your father for being very kind to me; here comes Firefly now, and I must be off," and bowing politely, Little Grit walked out to where the stable boy held his horse, and mounting, set off at a canter, greatly to the surprise of his steed, who seemed anxious to go at once into the flying gait he was used to.

Increasing his speed after awhile, Little Grit soon had Firefly dashing along, as though he were carrying Express, and it was not very long before he came in sight of Dan Benton's cabin.

Hearing the clatter of hoofs the stock-tender came out to see who it was, for it was not Pony Rider time, and beholding the Wild Rider he said sadly:

"Well, my boy, you come to a sad home now, for my Bessie has gone, and I almost wish you had allowed those devils to hang us both."

"Cheer up, Mr. Benton, for I have come to have a talk with you," said the youth, cheerily.

"I am glad to see you, Wild Rider, but

talking will not bring my child back, but come in."

"I am not so sure of that, Mr. Benton, for talking does a great deal sometimes."

"Little Grit, your words mean something," eagerly said the sorrowing father, grasping the youth by the arm.

"True, they do mean something, but I can offer no explanation, only ask you if you have confidence in me?"

"Yes, to the end, my boy."

"Well, I believe I can restore you your daughter ere sunrise."

"How? For Heaven's sake tell me how, boy?"

"By paying a ransom for her."

"A ransom! anything will I do to get back my child."

"A large sum is asked, Mr. Benton."

"My child is worth it, be it what it may."

"But you are poor, and—"

"Name the sum, Little Grit."

"Ten thousand dollars."

"I will pay it."

CHAPTER XX.

WILD RIDER KEEPS HIS PLEDGE.

LITTLE GRIT fairly started at the words of the stock tender.

"I will pay it!"

He glanced into the man's face and read there determination and truth, and no sign that he had made an idle assertion.

But then, how could a poor stock-tender pay so large a sum? was in his thoughts.

"You pay ten thousand dollars, Mr. Benton?" he asked in surprise.

"Yes, I will pay it, my boy, for the restoration of my daughter; I do not wonder you look surprised, for you know just what I have received as a stock-tender, and cannot understand how I could lay up such a sum.

"But tell me to whom is this money to be paid, and by whom, and when?"

"You are to give me the gold-dust, and I pledge myself to return you your daughter, or the metal, unless I am killed."

"When do you want it?"

"Now, if I can get it."

"You will wait until dark?"

"Yes, for the sun is setting now."

"Then you shall have it."

"And you really have that sum, Mr. Benton?"

"Yes, and far more; listen, my boy, and while we are waiting for darkness to come I will tell you a secret that my child even does not know.

"Having seen better days yourself, you can see that I have been educated, and I will tell you that I came of good stock, and my parents were rich.

"There were but two of us, a brother, ten

years younger than myself, and whom my parents idolized, and I was devotedly attached to, although he grew up very wild.

"At the death of my parents my brother and myself were left equal shares in the property, and all was left in my control, for he was not of age.

"But alas! I was no restraint upon him, and he ran through with his inheritance, and, knowing my love for him, did all manner of things that got him into trouble, well knowing that I would help him out.

"The result of all this was that he beggared me, and to raise money committed forgery and fled.

"Well, I paid his debts, but the officers of the law were after him, and I knew that if taken I could not save him, and almost broken-hearted and completely ruined by fortune I sought another home.

"But misfortune dogged me, and my wife dying, I drifted westward year by year, earning just money enough to educate my daughter at a good school where I had left her.

"At length I became what I am now, having failed in the mines to find gold and despairing of ever getting rich, I sent for my daughter to come and live with me here, and the very day after her arrival luck changed, for I struck a rich lead of gold in my old mine back in the mountain.

"Well, my boy, I determined to remain here as stock-tender until I had back all of my old fortune to give my Bessie, and I have secretly bought back the old homestead, and in a few months expected to go East with my child and my diggings in gold dust.

"Now I have dug out and hidden away some fifty thousand dollars, and you may know that it all should go to get my child back.

"The secret I have told to no one, excepting you, and I feel that you will never betray me; but those devils that strung me up hinted that I had gold hidden somewhere."

"But how should they know, Mr. Benton?" asked Little Grit.

"There is but one way; my brother is out here and he may know, having found out in some way that I had bought back the old homestead."

"Your brother out here, you say, sir?"

"Yes, and you know him, and I know him, too, though we have seemed not to recognize each other, yet I feel confident that he is feigning ignorance of who I am, though it has been fifteen years since we met."

"I cannot imagine what he can be, sir."

"Grey Benton is his name."

"Ha! Gambler Grey, the Kid Glove Sport."

"Yes, my boy, you know him now, and you know no good of him."

"True, sir, and I do not like him," said Little Grit, frankly.

"I cannot blame you, for he is a very evil man; but come, it is dark now, and I will get you the gold, and should aught befall me, you will know where my treasure is hidden, so that you can give it to Bessie," and rising, Daniel Benton led the way from the cabin, and diving into the bushes back of the stockade, halted on the bank of a small stream.

"Do you see this rock, my boy?"

"Yes."

"And yonder large tree in a line with it?"

"Yes."

"Well, watch me," and so saying Daniel Benton waded into the stream, and with a sharp hook scraped the bottom until it caught in something heavy.

"Here is my treasure-box, Little Grit," and out of the sand he dragged a rudely-made box, and opening it, counted out sufficient loose gold to make up the amount demanded, and then returned the chest to its secure hiding-place, while Little Grit wrapped up that which he had left out.

"You know the secret now, boy, and you have the ransom gold, so go, and for the love of God, bring me back my child, and breathe to no one what I have told you," said Daniel Benton, with deep feeling.

"I will never betray you, Dan Benton, and will ever be the friend of you and your daughter," and shouldering his weighty load of precious metal, Little Grit returned to the cabin, and mounting Firefly, rode away in the direction of his rendezvous with the Spirit of the Canyon, the moon lighting his pathway over hill and through valley, and then across the prairie to the Pilot Tree, which he fearlessly approached to find no human being near.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MEETING.

"I BELIEVE the woman meant what she said, and I will wait," said Little Grit, as the moon soared high into the heavens, and yet he saw no sign of the coming woman and her captive.

"It is strange that she knew that Dan Benton had money, for he believed his secret unknown; well, my advice to him is to leave these parts, or his wicked brother, if he finds out he has gold, will commit a greater crime than forgery.

"Ah me! I should hate to give Bessie up, for if I am but nineteen I love her dearly; but does she care for me, whom everybody calls a boy?"

"That I will have to find out by asking her, and I will, if she refuses me— Ah! there comes some one now—yes, it is the Spirit of the Canyon, and she is not alone.

"I do wish I could find out the mystery about that woman, and also about that Boy Bandit, who seems to hate me so, for he persistently threatens me and dogs my trail.

"If it were not that I wanted to take him alive, I could have killed him on a score of occasions.

"Perhaps she may know, and I will ask her.

"She approaches cautiously, so I will ride out into the moonlight so that she can recognize me," and Little Grit rode from beneath the thick foliage of the tree, and instantly the two persons approaching came to a halt.

But, after an instant's scrutiny, as though satisfied, they came on once more, and soon drew rein not ten feet from where the youth sat on his horse.

"Well, I have kept my word, Wild Rider," said the woman calmly, and she laid her hand upon the shoulder of Bessie Benton, who had not spoken a word.

"And I have kept mine," answered Little Grit.

"You have the gold?"

"Yes."

"The amount I demanded?"

"As near as it could be guessed at."

"Enough! I return you the maiden, who has been in my charge only; but there is one demand I make."

"Well?"

"Bid her father take her far from here, or if you love her, and she loves you, make her your wife, and stay no longer here, for your lives are in danger."

"My life is always in danger," was the reckless reply.

"Then protect her life and her honor, for I tell you frankly that there is one who would harm her, and what I now do will cause him bitter anger against me, and that is why I asked the gold as ransom, to appease his wrath."

"Hah! and that person is—"

"The Boy Bandit."

"What is that boy to you?"

"It matters not what he is to me, or I to him, only do not disregard my warning, or death and sorrow will follow, I assure you."

"Say you will go, please, say you will go, Little Grit," pleaded Bessie Benton, speaking for the first time since the meeting.

"If you will go with me, yes," boldly answered the youth.

"Gladly!"

"As my wife?"

"Yes."

"I am not two years your senior, Bessie, but I am a man in feeling, and I love you, and for your sake I will leave here, and give up the wild life I lead, where otherwise I would glory in remaining and braving the Boy Bandit and his whole band."

"Boy, you are reckless, brave to foolhardiness, but I warn you to beware of Gold Plume, the Boy Bandit, for he is merciless.

"Crime has made him what he is, and he revels in danger and combat, and is merciless toward those he hates."

"And he hates me?"

"He has been told to hunt you down!"

"By whom?"

"By an enemy of yours; it matters not who he is, for you have foes as well as friends; but take the girl and go, and when you are happy remember that a poor outcast woman, one whom men fly from as they would from a ghost, risked her life to give you happiness."

"But you must have some motive for this, other than a desire to serve this maiden and myself."

"I have; it is a motive that is a curse to man and woman—*jealousy!*"

She spoke the word with intense feeling, and having taken the gold, simply waved her hand in farewell and rode away.

Both Little Grit and Bessie watched her until she was out of sight, and then the latter said, sadly:

"Poor thing, she seems to suffer from some great sorrow in the past; but be she what she may, I cannot but regard her most kindly, for she carried me to a cavern retreat in the mountains, cared for me most tenderly, and pledged herself that no harm should befall me; but I was kept under guard, and I feel confident that she holds great influence with the bandits."

"And I shall love her, for giving you to me, Bessie," said Little Grit softly, and the two turned the heads of their horses homeward, and just at dawn Daniel Benton clasped his daughter in his arms, and three happy people sat down to the frugal breakfast that morning in the humble cabin of the stock-tender.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE DUELIST'S SON.

"You asked to see me, Colonel Hewlett," and Little Grit entered the temporary quarters of the cavalry officer, the morning following the restoration of Bessie Benton to her father.

The colonel was seated in an easy camp-chair, and before him were some official-

looking papers, while at the window sat Helen engaged in embroidering a sofa cushion.

"Yes, young gentleman, I do wish to see you; I have learned this morning that you rescued Bessie Benton from the bandits."

"I did little in the matter, sir, other than bringing her back to her home."

"You are modest, sir; but I also learn that the stock-tender, Benton, leaves the country to-day with his daughter, and that you accompany them?"

"I do, sir; I will give up this wild life at once."

"May I ask why you have come to this sudden determination, young man?"

A flush passed over the face of the youth; but after an instant of hesitation, he answered:

"Colonel Hewlett, I will frankly tell you, sir.

"Up to the day when I completed my long ride, I had but one main object in view, one I had been trained up to, and one which I cherished most fondly."

"And that was—?" asked the colonel, as the youth paused, and Helen looked up quickly from her work.

"I will tell you, sir; it was to one day meet you in personal encounter, and kill you!"

The eyes of Little Grit never wavered as he spoke, but he looked squarely into the face of the man whom he had made such a startling declaration, and who asked quickly:

"To kill me?"

"Yes, Colonel Hewlett, and I will tell you why.

"From my earliest boyhood I have been taught by one person to believe that my father was pursued through life and cruelly murdered by one who was supposed to be his friend, and I was educated to one aim, and that was to one day avenge him by killing his slayer.

"Three years ago the person who had so urged me on was murdered, with others of a train, by Indians, and in looking over the papers left for my perusal, I discovered that I was perhaps wrong to seek redress, as they implicated my father.

"But I had taken a solemn oath to one day hold you responsible, and I set to work to accomplish it.

"When you were on the Southern border, I sought you there, but arrived to find that you had just been sent abroad by the Government, so I determined to bide my time until your return, and, to keep myself in practice with fire-arms, and inured to danger, I came here and enlisted as a Pony Express Rider, for, an officer whom I know

well, told me that you would be ordered into this part of the country.

"I waited long, but at last you came, and I saved your daughter from a cruel fate, and that broke down the barrier of hatred I felt for you; but my oath stared me in the face, and I was determined to keep it, up to the day I accomplished my long ride.

"I was carried, not to my room, but to Judge Hunter's, that adjoins this one, and as the wall is frail, I heard your confession to your daughter, and then I knew that you too had been wronged, not only by my father, but by the woman you had loved, the one who had so persistently trained me for one purpose—to kill you.

"That person was my mother, Colonel Hewlett, and though I loved her dearly, I now know that she became a monomaniac on the subject of revenging the death of my father, the man who had stolen from you your bride.

"Then it was, Colonel Hewlett, that I determined to bury in my heart the secret, to break the oath forced upon me in childhood, and give up the red trail that has warped my whole life."

Little Grit paused, his face very pale, and down the fair cheeks of Helen Hewlett rolled pearly tear-drops, as she gazed upon him, while Colonel Hewlett arose, and said in a voice that quivered, in spite of his self-control:

"And you, then, are the son of Lester and Corinne Lamdell?"

"I am, sir, and a strange freak of my mother, after my father's death, was to christen me *Hewlett Lamdell*."

"Great God! Corinne did this, and yet made you take oath to one day take my life?"

"Yes, sir; it was to keep you ever in my mind, by your name; but do not misunderstand me, sir—I had no idea of playing the assassin, but intended to meet you, as my father met you, in the *duello*."

"I believe you, my boy, for you are as noble as you are brave; but now let us bury the grim phantoms of the bygone, and, forgetting the shadows between us, I offer you my hand—and more, as the President has given me permission to select from these gallant frontier youths, one upon whom to confer a lieutenancy in the army, I here offer you this commission of a second lieutenant of cavalry, and appoint you chief of scouts of my command."

The youth grasped the outstretched hand, but said, calmly:

"I thank you, Colonel Hewlett, more than I can express in words; but it is best that I remain not here, and duty to one who is to be my wife calls me away from scenes where

her life, and the life of her father are in danger."

"You refer to Bessie Benton?" quietly asked Helen, without raising her eyes from her work.

"Yes, she has promised to be my wife."

"And you have nobly won her, my boy; but I do wish that you would reconsider my offer," said the colonel.

"I cannot, sir, I thank you, and will say farewell, for we leave within the hour," and as the youth spoke there came a wailing cry from without, and hearing his name called, Little Grit bounded from the room, followed by the colonel and Helen in alarm, for it was evident from the excited cries in front of the Riders' Rest that some dire calamity had happened.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE MOUNTAIN CABIN.

THE scene changes now, from the Riders' Rest at Rocky Glen to the mountains, leagues away where, in a stout cabin, built against a cliff, sat a woman of rare beauty and strange costume, for she was attired in a robe more like a shroud for the dead than a dress for the living.

She was pacing the floor to and fro, with nervous step, and her darkly bronzed face was clouded with thoughts of no pleasant nature, while she clinched her little hands together spasmodically.

The cabin contained two rooms, was stoutly built and not uncomfortably furnished, and upon the wall, each side of the door, hung arms ready for instant use.

Presently there came the ring of iron against rock without, and the woman started, while the next moment a man of commanding form, but with face closely masked, entered the cabin.

He was dressed in buckskin, wore moccasins upon his feet, and a wildcat skin cap, and was armed with a belt of revolvers and a long knife.

"Well, Clotilde, my visit seems unexpected to you," he said, in a deep voice.

"No, you are welcome, as you know, although a storm must follow your coming," replied the woman.

"And why? are you jealous already of the fair maiden you so cleverly captured?"

"I *was* jealous; I am not now."

"Once jealous, with a woman, is always jealous; why have you changed, may I ask?"

"There is no one to excite my jealousy," was the calm reply, but it startled the man into the cry:

"Great God! have you killed her?"

"I am not so fond of taking life even after

my contact with you, as to kill one that can be otherwise removed from your path," and there was a sneer in the woman's tone.

"You have gotten rid of this girl, then?"

"Yes."

"How?" and the man's voice trembled with passion.

"I simply released her for ransom."

"For ransom! what mean you, Clotilde?"

"I captured the girl, and finding her very beautiful, and knowing that she would win you from me, for, in spite of what you are, I love you, I asked for her ten thousand dollars in gold-dust, and it was paid."

"By whom?"

"Her father."

"Ha! then you found his mine?"

"No, he sent me the gold and I gave the girl into the charge of the one who brought it."

"And who was that?"

"Little Grit."

"Curses! had you that boy in your power and allowed him to escape?"

"Yes."

"Beware, Clotilde, for you may go too far; the girl's going I pardon you for, as I get the gold for her, and I can easily get her into my power again; but don't try me beyond endurance."

"The girl you cannot get, for ere this she has left with the man she is to marry."

The man sprung forward and seized the woman's shoulder with a grip that made her cry out with pain, while he hissed forth:

"Clotilde, I give you forty-eight hours to return that girl to me, or place her father in my power, for with him I can bring her back if she has gone to the end of the earth."

"If I refuse?"

"Then your punishment for thwarting me shall be worse than death."

The woman turned deadly pale, but, after a moment's thought, said:

"I will obey."

"Enough, and beware of how you trifle with me in the future, for if I get Daniel Benton into my power, I will be worth millions, or he shall die, if he gives not up the secret of his mine."

"I will obey," repeated the woman, and, as the man turned from the cabin he continued:

"Remember, I want both the father and daughter, and if she is married I will make her a widow and then marry her."

The woman's eyes flashed dangerously, but she looked up and asked quietly:

"And I?"

"Shall go the way of her husband, so as to make the marriage binding: now go!"

The man strode from the cabin, and ten minutes after the woman was riding down

the mountain-side, mounted upon her white horse, and at her back came half a score of villainous-looking men, armed to the teeth.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FATAL LETTERS.

WHEN Little Grit heard the wailing cry, and his name called in pleading tones, he rushed out of Colonel Hewlett's room, to discover Bessie Benton lying unconscious upon a bench, and Judge Hunter supporting her, while near by stood a tall, handsome young man, dressed as a Pony Express Rider and gazing upon the maiden with anxious look.

Early that morning Little Grit and Bessie had come on to the Riders' Rest together, and were to be joined there soon after by Daniel Benton, when they were to at once depart from that portion of the country, the stock-tender carrying his treasure with him on a pack-horse.

When summoned to the room of Colonel Hewlett, Little Grit had left Bessie out on the porch, and he was greatly startled to find her in a swoon, and feared some fearful calamity had befallen her.

"In God's name! what is it?" he asked.

"Ah, my boy, there has been devilish work done, and poor Bessie heard this young gentleman tell me of it," and Judge Hunter nodded toward the Pony Rider, whom none seemed to know, and who, seeing Little Grit's anxiety, said:

"Permit me to explain: I am the Pony Rider who has taken your place, sir, if you are the Wild Rider, as I believe, and when I arrived at Dan Benton's station, I found the door closed, the stock gone, and two letters tacked upon the post.

"I came right on here, and gave the letters to this gentleman, Judge Hunter, and he read them aloud, and this young lady overheard them."

"And where are the letters?" asked Little Grit, calmly, while Helen had Bessie borne into her room.

"Here they are, my boy," and the judge handed Little Grit a sheet of paper on which was some writing in a bold hand, and another piece folded, and addressed to Bessie Benton.

"I took the liberty of reading them, Wild Rider, not knowing what ill-tidings they might contain."

"You did right, judge," and aloud Little Grit read the unfolded sheet first.

It was as follows:

"A PLACARD.

"TO LITTLE GRIT, THE WILD RIDER.

"WHEREAS you did not at once follow the advice given you by the Spirit of the Canyon, and depart from this wild land with her you love, and her fa-

ther, Fate has been hot on your footsteps, and taken from this world Daniel Benton, who loved his gold more than his life, and whose grave shall be as unfindable as the treasure he refuses to give up.

"If you would save your life, and the life of her you love, go, and at once, from this land, or, ever upon your trail will be

"GOLD PLUME,
"THE BOY BANDIT."

That are plain talk, leetle pard," said Trumps, who was standing near; but Little Grit made no reply and opened the letter, which was addressed to Bessie Benton, and was as follows:

"MY POOR CHILD:—

"When your eyes read these lines, I will be dead, for my time has come, and my foes show no mercy, and will slay me because I will not divulge the secret of where my gold is buried.

"That secret, Wild Rider, the noble youth to whom you must now look for protection, knows, and he will give you the gold your father leaves you.

"More, I cannot now write to you, and only the mercy of a woman permits me to write these few lines, and that woman is the Spirit of the Canyon.

"Death stares me in the face, and with my last breath I bid you farewell, and ask God to bless you and the one you love, forever.

"Your dying father,

"DANIEL BENTON."

When Little Grit ceased reading, with stern lip and flashing eye, he glanced up and saw Colonel Hewlett gazing fixedly at him, and said:

"Colonel Hewlett, if you will allow me to retract my decision, sir, I shall do so and accept your very kind offer, for I remain here now, as there is work for me to do."

"Willingly, sir, but you will be in deadly danger at all times."

"I will risk that, sir."

"Then the commission is yours, sir."

"Thank you, sir; now you are to ride my run, I believe?" and Little Grit turned to the new Pony Rider, who answered, pleasantly:

"I was ordered here for that purpose."

"It is one of fearful danger."

"So be it, like you I will take the chances," was the indifferent reply, while Trumps stepping forward, said, as he gazed fixedly into the Pony Rider's face:

"Pears ter me, we hes met afore, pard, for if I mistakes not, you is ther youth as is known as Buffalo Bill, south o' here?"

"What! Buffalo Bill the Boy Guide, Scout and Hunter?" asked Judge Hunter, while all present crowded nearer, having often heard the name in connection with many a thrilling story of life on the plains.

"Yes, I am Buffalo Bill, now Pony Express Rider," was the modest reply, while Trumps shouted:

"Give us yer hand, pard, fer I knows yer now, an' yer is chained lighntnin' on a jam-boree an' no mistake.

"Wild Rider and Buffalo Bill, a pair o' twins that will make this country howl; look out for 'em, gerloots, an' ef Gold Plume don't

take in his horns afore long, he'll get 'em sawed off.

"Come one, come all, an' let's drink ter ther lads, fer they is white clean through an' grit to ther jaw-bone," and Trumps led the way to the bar, eagerly followed by the thirsty ones of the crowd, while Little Grit turned to the host of the Riders' Rest, and said:

"Judge Hunter, I have often heard you speak of your daughter whom you lost years ago, and I ask you to love in her place Bes-sie Benton, and be as a father to her."

"My boy, with my whole heart, I will be a father to her, and to you too, and here shall be your home," and the judge spoke feelingly, while Colonel Hewlett said:

"My friends, this young gentleman is no longer Little Grit, the Wild Rider of the Pony Express, but Lieutenant Hewlett Lam-dell of my staff, and Chief of Scouts, and his duty shall be to free this border of the out-laws who infest it."

"And I will do that duty, or die in the attempt—I mean it!" said Hewlett Lamdell, firmly.

[Thus ends the career of Little Grit, the Wild Rider; but, should my kind reader de-sire to follow him as an officer of the army, and know of the daring exploits of Buffalo Bill as Pony Express Rider, and the career of other personages who have figured in my romance of the Far West, he will find it in

GOLD PLUME,
THE BOY BANDIT;
OR,
THE KID GLOVE GAMBLER.]
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